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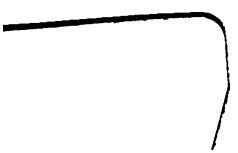
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INNOCENT
MRS. OLIPHANT









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Nelly.

INNOCENT:

A TALE OF MODERN LIFE.

By Mrs. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF "THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD," ETC., ETC.

FOURTH EDITION, WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		AGE
I.	THE OLD HOUSE	1
II.	THE NEWS, AND HOW IT WAS RECEIVED	8
III.	THE FAMILY	16
IV.	THE FRIENDS OF THE FAMILY	23
V.	FREDERICK'S WAY	32
VI.	PISA	40
VII.	THE PALAZZO SCARAMUCCI	48
VIII.	THE COUSINS	55
IX.	AT HOME	63
X.	THE ARRIVAL	70
XI.	AT HOME AND NOT AT HOME	79
XII.	A LOVE TALE	87
XIII.	CONSULTATIONS	94
XIV.	A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW	101
XV.	A SUNDAY AT HOME	109
XVI.	INNOCENT'S FIRST ADVENTURE	117
XVII.	FREDERICK TO THE RESCUE	124
XVIII.	PHILOSOPHY FOR GIRLS	132
XIX.	THE FLOWER OF STERBORNE	140
XX.	WHAT IT IS TO BE "IN LOVE"	148
XXI.	A FAMILY DINNER	156
XXII.	ABOUT ANOTHER MARRIAGE	164
XXIII.	AMANDA	172

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIV.	What the Family thought	180
XXV.	After a Year	188
XXVI.	A Proposal	195
XXVII.	Mrs. Frederick	202
XXVIII.	A new Complication	211
XXIX.	Innocent's Outset in the World	217
XXX.	The High Lodge	224
XXXI.	The Minster and the Villa	231
XXXII.	The Moment of Fate	238
XXXIII.	Flight	247
XXXIV.	A Bereaved Husband	254
XXXV.	Mrs. Eastwood's Investigation	261
XXXVI.	At Home	268
XXXVII.	Innocent's Confession	275
XXXVIII.	Into further Deeps	283
XXXIX.	An Appeal	290
XL.	Family Opinions	298
XLI.	An Unpopular Wedding	304
XLII.	After the Wedding	311
XLIII.	The Gathering of the Storm	318
XLIV.	The Thunderbolt	325
XLV.	The First Deserter	333
XLVI.	The Evidence	340
XLVII.	The Trial	347
XLVIII.	The Second Day	363
XLIX.	Delivered	368
L.	Jenny's Meditation	375
LI.	The Nunnery	380
LII.	What became of Lady Longueville	382
LIII.	Conclusion	391

INNOCENT:

A TALE OF MODERN LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD HOUSE.

THE Eastwoods lived in an old house in one of the south-western suburbs of London. It was one of those houses which, dating only from the prosaic age of Queen Anne, have come to be picturesque in their way—which they were never intended to be—and are comfortable, which they were intended to be, to a degree rarely attained by all our modern efforts. What advances we have made since then in every way! And yet all Belgravia did not hold a house so thoroughly good for living in, so pleasant, so modest, so dignified, and so refined, as the big brick house, partly whitewashed, partly retaining its native red, lichened all over with brown and yellow mosses, in which, at the outset of this history, Mrs. Eastwood lived with her children. It had been built by the Eastwoods of the time, more than a century and a half ago. It had given shelter to various generations since then—their mortal inn and lodging, the everlasting dwelling-place of their memory. They had left layers, so to speak, of old furniture, from the japanned screens and cabinets of the founder, to the hideous haircloth and mahogany of George IV.; and pictures and knick-knacks, and precious old china for which collectors would have given its weight in gold. All these riches were not shown off to advantage, as they might have been. You stumbled on them in corners; you found them in out-of-the-way cupboards, in rooms that were rarely used. In short, you could not

take a walk on a wet day about this delightful house without finding something out that you had not seen before. For my own part I prefer this to the modern device of making a museum or china-shop of one's drawing-room. The drawing-room was a place to live in at The Elms. It had a hundred prettinesses about, none of which had been bought within the memory of any of the young people, except, indeed, a few foolish knick-knacks belonging to Ellinor—for what girl worth calling such was ever without knick-knacks? But its supreme use was to be lived in, and for this it was infinitely well adapted. Its only drawback that I know—and that many people thought a great advantage—was that, being close to London, you saw nothing from the windows that you might not have seen a hundred miles deep in the country. The drawing-room windows looked out upon a great green lawn, set in old trees. In winter, when the trees had lost their leaves, bits of other old houses, red and mossy, looked in through the bare branches; but in spring the farther end of the lawn was carpeted with primroses, and canopied with foliage, and the long avenue of elms at one side, and the narrower path on the other under the lime-trees, which was called the Lady's Walk, might have graced a squire's house anywhere. Both of these ended in a high paling; but I defy you to have found that out when elms and limes alike were in their glory of summer array.

After having said so much about the house, I may introduce you to its inhabitants. Mrs. Eastwood was a widow, and had four children, all as yet at home under the maternal roof. The eldest son was in a public office; the second, Richard, commonly called Dick, was at home "reading" for one of those examinations which occupy all our youth now-a-days. The third boy, who bore the magnificent name of Plantagenet, usually, I am grieved to say, shortened into Jenny, was still at Eton. One only remains to be accounted for, and that was Ellinor. She was but one, counted according to ordinary arithmetic; but she was as good as three additional at least, reckoning by her importance in the household. "If you count girls, there are seven of us; but some people don't count girls. I'm one," said one of *Mr. Punch's* delightful little boys in the old days of Leech. Ellinor Eastwood might have adapted this saying with perfect propriety to her own circumstances. The boys might or might not be counted; but to enter once into the house without hearing, seeing, divining the girl in it was impossible. Not that she was a remarkable young woman in any way. I don't know if she could justly be called clever; and she certainly was not more perfectly educated than usual—and does not everybody say that all women are badly educated? Her brothers knew twenty times as much as she did. They had all been at Eton; and Frederick, the eldest, was a University man, and had taken a very good class, though not the highest; and Dick was costing his mother a fortune in "coaches," and was required by the conditions of his examination

to be a perfect mine of knowledge; they ought by all rules to have been as superior to their sister intellectually and mentally as daylight is to darkness. But they were not. I don't venture to explain how it was; perhaps the reader may in his or her experience have met with similar cases, though I allow that they go against a good many theories. The household was a young household altogether. Mrs. Eastwood herself was under fifty, which, for a woman who has had neither bad health nor trouble in her life, is quite a youthful age. Her eldest son was six-and-twenty. There had never appeared a very great difference between them; for Frederick had always been the most serious member of the family. His name of itself was a proof of this. While all the others were addressed by a perpetually varying host of diminutives and pet names, Frederick had always remained Frederick. I need not point out how different this is from "Fred." He was the only member of the household who had as yet brought any trouble or anxiety to it, but he was by far the most proper and dignified person in the house. The rest were very youthful indeed, varying, as we have said, from the light-hearted though sober-visaged youthfulness of seven-and-forty to the tricksey boyhood of sixteen. It was a house, accordingly, in which there was always something going on. The family were well off, and they were popular; they were rich enough to give frequent and pleasant little entertainments, and they had never acquired that painful habit of asking, "Can we afford it?" which is so dreadful a drawback to social pleasures. I do not intend to imply by this that there was any recklessness or extravagance in this well-ordered house. On the contrary, Mrs. Eastwood's bills were paid as by clockwork, with a regularity which was vexatious to all the tradesmen she employed; but neither she nor her children—blessed privilege!—knew what it was to be poor, and they had none of the habits of that struggling condition. That ghost which haunts the doors of the less comfortably endowed, which hovers by them in the very streets, and is always waiting round some corner—that black spectre of indebtedness or scarcity had never been seen at The Elms. There was a cheerful security of enough, about the house, which is more delightful than wealth. To be sure, there are great moral qualities involved in the material comfort of having enough, into which we need not enter. The comfort of the Eastwoods was a matter of habit. They lived as they had always lived. It never occurred to them to start on a different *pied*, or struggle to a higher level. What higher level could they want? They were gentlefolks, and well connected; no sort of *parvenu* glitter could have done anything for them, even had they thought of it; therefore it was no particular credit to them to be content and satisfied. The morality of the matter was passive in their case—it was habitual, it was natural, not a matter of resolution or thought.

And yet there had been one break in this simple and uncompli-

cated state of affairs. Four years before the date at which this history begins, an event had occurred to which the family still looked back with a sort of superstition,—a mingled feeling of awe, regret, and pride, such as might move the descendants of some hero who had abdicated a throne at the call of duty. The year in which Frederick took his degree, and left Oxford, Mrs. Eastwood had *put down her carriage.* I dare not print such words in ordinary type. She said very little about the reasons for this very serious proceeding; but it cannot be denied that there was a grandeur and pathos in the incident, which gave it a place in what may be called the mythology of the family. Nobody attempted to explain how it was, or why it was. It gave a touch of elevating tragedy and mystery to the comfortable home-life, which was so pleasant and free from care. When now and then a sympathizing friend would say, "You must miss your carriage," Mrs. Eastwood was always prompt to disclaim any need for pity. "I have always been an excellent walker," she said cheerily. She would not receive any condolences, and yet even she got a certain subtle pleasure, without knowing it, out of the renunciation. It was the hardest thing she had ever been called upon to do in her life, and how could she help being a little, a very little, proud of it? But, to be sure, this sentiment was quite unconscious. It was the only unexplained event in her innocent life. Ellinor, of course, half by instinct, half by reason of that ineffable communion between a mother and an only daughter, which makes the one conscious of all that passes within and without the other almost without words, knew exactly how this great family event had come about; but no one else knew, not even the most intimate friends of the house.

The cause, however, was nothing much out of the course of nature. Frederick, the eldest son and hope, he of whom everybody declared that he was his mother's stay and support, as good as the head of the family, had suddenly burst into her room one morning before she was up, like a sudden avalanche. He came to tell her, in the first place, that he had made up his mind not to go into the Church, for which he had been educated, and in which he had the best of prospects; and in the second place, that he was deeply in debt, and was going out to Australia by the next ship to repent and make up his deficiencies. Fancy having all this poured into your ears of a cold spring morning in your peaceful bed, when you woke up with the consciousness that to-day would be as yesterday, and, perhaps, still more tranquil and pleasant. Mrs. Eastwood was stricken dumb with consternation. It was the first time that trouble in this shape had ever visited her. Grief she had known—but that curtain of gentle goodness and well-seeming which covers the surface of life had never before been rudely rent before her eyes, revealing the abyss below. And the shock was all the greater that it *was Frederick* who gave it; he who had been her innocent child

just the other day, and who was still her serious boy, never the one to get into mischief. The surprise was so overwhelming that it almost deadened her sense of pain; and then, before she could fully realize what had happened, the real importance of the event was still further confused by the fact, that instead of judging the culprit on his real demerits, she had to pray and plead with him to give up his mad resolution, to beg him not to throw his life away after his money. So urgent did this become that she gradually forgot all about the blame attaching to him, and could think of nothing but those terrible threats about Australia, which gradually became the central fact of the catastrophe. To do him justice, Frederick was perfectly sincere, and had no thought of the admirable effect to be produced by his obstinate determination. Where is the family that does not know such scenes? The result was that the carriage was "put down," the debts paid, Australia averted; and after a short time Mr. Frederick Eastwood gained, after a severe examination, his present appointment, and all again went merry as marriage-bells. I don't know whether the examination was in reality severe; but at least Mrs. Eastwood thought so, which pleased her, and did nobody any harm; and as time went on she found to her entire satisfaction that every thing had been for the best, and that Providence had brought good out of evil. In the first place, it was "noble" of Frederick, when he found he could not conscientiously enter the Church, to scorn all mercenary motives, and not to be tempted by the excellent living which he knew awaited him. And then what a comfort and blessing it was to have him at home, instead of away down in Somersetshire, and only paying his family a visit two or three times in a year! Thus the fault faded out of sight altogether by the crowding of the circumstances round it; and Frederick himself, in contemplating (for he was always serious) the providential way in which his life had been arranged for him in a new groove, forgot that the first step in this arrangement had been a very reprehensible one on his own part, and came to regard the "putting down" of the carriage as the rest did—as a tremendous and mysterious family event, calling forth an intense pride and melancholy, but no individual sense of guilt or responsibility so far as he was personally concerned. "I don't like to take you out in a fly, Nelly," Mrs. Eastwood would sometimes say, as she gave a last touch to Ellinor's ribbons, and breathed a soft little sigh. "As if I cared!" cried the girl: "and besides, you can say, like Lady Dobson, that you never take your horses out at night." Now Lady Dobson was very rich, and in trade, and a standing joke in the Eastwood circle; and the party went off very merry in the fly, with never another thought of the carriage which had been "put down."

Light-hearted folk! That sudden tempest of trouble and terror which had driven Frederick into the Sealing-Wax Office, and the

ladies into Mr. Sutton's neat flys, gave, I think, on the whole, a zest to their happiness.

The drawing-room at The Elms was a large room, with a rounded end occupied by a great bow window, which opened like a door into a pretty conservatory, always gay with flowers. Opposite the fireplace were three other long and large windows, cut to the floor, from which you looked out over the long stretch of greensward embosomed in great trees which has been already described. In summer, the flower beds which were cut in the grass close under the windows were ablaze with brilliant colour; but in the meantime, on the afternoon when this story opens, nothing was visible but an interrupted golden line of crocus, defining each bed, and depending upon the sun to make the definition successful. When the day was bright the border bristled all round in close array with spikes of gold; but on this particular day it was gloomy, and the line was straggling and broken. On a damp February afternoon the strongest attraction is generally indoors; and the room was bright enough to satisfy the most difficult critic. Mrs. Eastwood had, as every mother of a family ought to have, her particular chair, with her particular little table and footstool, a detached and commanding position, a genial domestic throne, with the supremacy of which no one ever interfered. There was room for any one who wanted counsel to draw a chair by its side, and plenty of room for a big boy to stretch out his lazy length on the rug at its feet, resting a curly head, it might be, on the mother's footstool. Mrs. Eastwood was seated here in her black gown with violet ribbons, which was her compromise between the world and her widowhood. Sometimes she went the length of grey and red. I don't know what innocent prejudice she had to the effect that grey and red betokened still some recondite style of mourning; but such was her prejudice. She would have felt a blue ribbon to be profane. Need I say that she was plump, and had perhaps a little more colour than when she was twenty? But there were few wrinkles upon her pleasant face, and no clouds upon her forehead. She had known grief, innocent and holy, but no trouble of that wearing kind which saps the strength and steals the courage out of life, except that one of which the reader has been told; and that, as he has also been informed, had turned out for the best.

Ellinor was the only other member of the family present, except, indeed, a certain small Skye terrier, known by the name of Winks, who was a very important member of the family. As Winks, however, for the present is asleep coiled up in an easy chair, and happily unobservant of what is going on, we may leave him for an after occasion, and pass on to the young lady of the house. What can we say about her? Dear and gentle reader, you know half-a-hundred just like Nelly. She had brown hair, bright, dancing, *brown eyes, and a nose* which, thanks to Mr. Tennyson, we do not

require to describe as *retroussé*. It was "tip-tilted, like the petal of a flower." As there was not a straight line about her anywhere, this delicate little turn was appropriate. Although, however, it is true that there was no one straight line about the girl, the combination of a hundred soft curves produced a perfect pose of figure, light, firm, and elastic, like—well, like most girls of twenty. What can one say more? Nelly had no settled place like her mother. She was not restless, nor fidgetty, but she was everywhere at once. I don't know why it was necessary that she should be always in motion—for she never crossed the room or went from one table to another without a reason for it—but somehow there was a perpetual play of movement and variety in every room where she was. Even when she was absorbed in the tranquillity of needlework, the motion of her hand kept things going. She was like a brook: a soft atmosphere of sound and movement—always soft, always pleasant—belonged to her by nature; but, like the brook, she tranquillized the surrounding scenery; or, like a bird, making the quietness seem more complete by its flitting from one branch to another, and delicious trying over of its favourite notes. Nelly was not alarmingly good, nor perfect in any way I know of; but she fulfilled this mission of the girl, which I fear, among greater aims, is falling a little into disrepute—she filled the whole house with her youth, her brightness, her gaiety, her overflowing life. No great demands of any kind had yet been made upon her. Whether she would be capable of responding to them when they came, no one could tell; but in the meantime she fulfilled her primitive use with the most thorough completeness. She was the life of the house.

Mrs. Eastwood had brought in some letters with her to the drawing-room. They had been delivered at luncheon, and as none looked very pressing, they had been suffered to wait. This happy household was in no anxiety about its letters. That continual fear of bad news which afflicts most of us had no place in the bosom of the easy soul who had but one of her children absent from her, and he within half-an-hour by railway. She went over them at leisure, reading here and there a few words aloud. "Fancy, Nelly, Claude Somerville is going to be married at last," she said. "I wonder if his people will think her good enough; but indeed they will never think any one good enough; and poor little Mary Martin is going out as a governess. Now, how much better if Claude had married her, and saved such a sad experiment?"

"But did they ever care for each other?" asked Nelly, with open eyes.

"No, I don't think they did. But what a nice arrangement it would have been! Whereas the girl he is going to marry is an heiress," said Mrs. Eastwood, "and has no need of him, so to speak. Dear me! I do not mean to speak against Providence; but I should like sometimes to interfere.—Listen! 'Poor little Mary

bears up very bravely. She pretends to make light of it; but what a change it will be from her home, and her father who spoilt her?'"

"Mamma, let us have her here on a long visit," cried Nelly. "I am sure if she chose she might spend her life among her friends."

"She is a very independent little thing," said Mrs. Eastwood doubtfully. "Frederick and she were once rather good friends; but you may write to her if you like, Nelly. It will always be kind. The Claude Somervilles are going to Italy for their wedding trip. Dear me! why can't people stay at home? one hears of nothing but Italy. And, speaking of that, here is an Italian post-mark. I wonder who it comes from."

A few minutes passed, and Mrs. Eastwood made no further communication. "Where is it from?" Ellinor asked twice, not caring to be kept in suspense, for the correspondence of the house, like other things, was in common. Her mother, however, made no reply. She uttered various half articulate exclamations—"Dear me! dear me! Poor man; has it really come to that!" she murmured as she read. "What is it, mamma!" said Ellinor. Mrs. Eastwood read it all over, cried out, "Good gracious, Nelly!" and then turning back to the first page, read it over again. When Nelly found it impossible to bear this suspense any longer, she rose and went behind her mother's chair, and looked over her shoulder: "Is it bad news?" she cried, looking at the cramped lines which she could not make out. "Dear! dear me! dear me! what shall I do, Nelly?" said Mrs. Eastwood, wringing her hands; and then she added, "Don't write to Mary Martin, my dear, here is some one to be looked to of our own."

CHAPTER II.

THE NEWS, AND HOW IT WAS RECEIVED.

MRS. EASTWOOD had scarcely uttered these mysterious and affecting words, when a roll of wheels, a resounding knock, a peal at the outer door, announced visitors. "Oh, call Brownlow, Nelly, quick, before the door is opened!" she said. "Oh, Brownlow, stop a moment; I have just heard of a death in the family. I don't think I can see any one; I don't think that I ought to be able to see any one, Nelly?"

"Who is it, mamma?" cried Nelly, taking possession of the letter. Mrs. Eastwood took out her handkerchief and put it lightly to her eyes.

"I don't mean that I was fond of him," she said, "or could *be, for I did* not know him, scarcely—but still it is a shock. It is

my brother-in-law, Nelly, Mr. Vane—whom you have heard of. I wonder now, who it is at the door? If it is Mrs. Everard, Brownlow, you can let her in; but if it is Lady Dobson, or Miss Hill, or any other of those people, say I have just heard of a death in the family. Now run! it must be some one of importance, for there is another knock at the door."

"Mr. Vane—why he is not even a relation!" cried Nelly. "There! Brownlow is sending the people away. My step-aunt's husband, whom none of us ever saw ——"

"It would be more civil to call him your step-uncle, Nelly. People generally do—especially as he is dead now, poor man, and never can take anything upon him. Oh, dear! why, it was Mrs. Barclay, and her brother, Sir Alexis—people I really wanted to see. How unfortunate! Brownlow, I am sure I said particularly, Lady Dobson, or Miss Hill, or that kind of person——"

"You said Mrs. Everard was to come in, mum, and no one else," said Brownlow, standing very stiffly erect with his tray, and the card on it, in his hand.

"That is how it always happens," said Nelly, "when you say you are not at home. The nicest people always get sent away: the bores come at other times, and are admitted as a matter of course. Not to say that one should always tell the truth; it is the best policy, like honesty, and other good things."

"Nelly, you forget yourself," said Mrs. Eastwood. "When I say not at home, everybody understands what is meant. But in the present instance there is no fib. Of course, now we must keep it up for to-day, at least. You can say, 'Not a near relation,' Brownlow; 'nothing to draw down the blinds for, but very unexpected and a shock.' That is enough. Poor man! it is true I never saw him but twice, and my father never forgave poor Isabella for marrying him. Poor Isabella! But that is not all, dear. Give me the letter again."

"I am reading it, mamma," said Nelly, and she began to spell it out aloud, stumbling over the crabbed Italian, and somewhat mazed by mingled ignorance and wonder. "Here is something about a girl, a young lady. Who is this young lady, and what did you mean when you said some one of our very own?"

"I have been a wicked woman," said Mrs. Eastwood. "When poor Isabella died, I never asked about the baby; I took it for granted the baby died too. And I did hate the man so, Nelly; he killed her; I am sure he killed her. And here has the poor baby been living all the time! I am a wicked woman. I might have been of some use, and taken her away from that dreadful man."

"But she seems to have liked the dreadful man. It says here that she cannot be consoled. Poor thing! Don't you know anything about her, mamma?" cried Nelly. Here Mrs. Eastwood

took out her handkerchief once more, and this time cried in earnest with grief and shame.

"I am a hard-hearted, bad woman!" she said; "Don't contradict me, Nelly. A girl that is my own flesh and blood; and I never even inquired after her—did not know of her existence——"

"Well, mamma, I think I will give you absolution," said Nelly. "If you did not know of her existence, how could you inquire after her? Did poor Aunt Isabella die when she was born?"

"That is the worst of it all," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I must make a clean breast of it. I must not deceive myself any more. Yes, I did know of the poor child's existence. She must have been six or seven when Isabella died. The child had the fever too, and I persuaded myself she must have gone with her mother. For you see, Mr. Vane—poor man, he is dead; we must not speak any harm of him—was so very disagreeable in his letters. I know I ought to have inquired; but I had got to dislike him so much, and almost to be afraid of him——"

"I think it was not quite right of you," said Nelly, with the gravity of a judge.

"I know it was not," said the culprit, penitent. "Many a time I have said to myself, I would write, but always put it off again. However, it is not too late now to make amends to her; and as for him——. Give me the letter, Nelly. Oh! to think he should be dead—such a man as that."

"Well, surely, mamma, he is no great loss, if he was such a man."

"Not to us; oh no, not to us! Not to any one except himself; but for himself! Think, Nelly. However, we are not called upon to judge him, thank Heaven! And as for the poor child—the poor little girl——"

"It is a long time since Aunt Isabella died," said Nelly. "How old is the little girl now?"

Mrs. Eastwood had to make a great effort of recollection. She had many landmarks all through her life from which to date, and after a comparison of these, and some trouble in fixing the exact one that answered, she at length decided that her sister's death had taken place the year that Frederick had his fever, which was when he was sixteen. It is unnecessary for us to go into the details by which she proved her calculation—as that he grew out of all his clothes while he was ill, and had nothing to put on till his new mourning arrived, which was a melancholy business for an invalid. By this means, however, the fact was established, that "the poor little girl" must be at least sixteen, a startling conclusion, for which neither of the ladies were prepared.

"As old as Jenny," said Ellinor, pondering, with unusal gravity upon her face.

"*But then she is* a girl, dear, not a boy, remember," said Mrs.

Eastwood. "Jenny is a dear boy, but two of him in the house would be trying—in London. That is the worst of London. When boys are at home for the holidays they have so little scope, poor fellows. I wonder if she has had any education, poor child?"

"I wonder," said Nelly, still very grave. "Mamma, must this new cousin come here?"

"Where else could she go, Nelly? We must be very kind to her. Besides, she will be a companion for you. It will be very delightful, I don't doubt, to have her," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a certain quaver and hesitation in her voice.

Nelly made no immediate reply. "It will be very odd," she said, after a pause, "to have another girl in the house—a girl not so far off one's own age. Dear, what an unpleasant sort of creature I must be! I don't feel quite so sure that I shall like it. Perhaps she will be much nicer than I am; perhaps people will like her better. I am dreadfully afraid, mamma, I am not good enough to be quite happy about it. If she had been six instead of sixteen——"

"Nelly, don't say anything, dear. She is our own flesh and blood. You would be good to any stranger. As for being nicer than you, my Nelly!—But poor child, poor child, without either father or mother, without a friend to stand by her—inconsolable in a strange country——"

"But, mamma," said Nelly, scarcely able to keep from crying in sympathy, "it cannot be a strange country to her if she has lived there all her life."

"That does not matter, dear; nothing can change the fact," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I have been in Italy, and I know how English people live. They hold themselves aloof. Though they live there all their lives, it is always a strange country to them. And he was not the sort of man to make friends. I dare say she has been brought up by some old servant or other, and allowed to run wild." Here Mrs. Eastwood paused and sighed. She was the kindest woman in the world, but the idea of a girl of sixteen, with no manners or education, suddenly thrown upon her hands, a new member of her family, brought up under circumstances so different, and no doubt unlike them in every way, was not without its painful side. And she was angry with herself for seeing this, and grieved to think that she had so little natural affection or Christian charity. "Our whole hearts ought to go out towards her, poor thing," she added, with profound compunction. "She has nobody else in the world to look to; and, Nelly, whatever may be our first momentary feeling, of course there can be no real hesitation——"

"Of course," said Nelly, springing to her feet. "There is Mrs. Everard's knock this time, and now I know you will tell her all about it. What room must she have? the little green room, or the room in the wing, or——"

"Dear," said Mrs. Eastwood coaxingly, "the kindest and the

warmest would be the little room, off yours—close to us both—to make the poor child feel at home."

"I knew that was what you would say," cried Nelly, half laughing, half crying; "it is exactly like you, mamma; not only take her in, but take her into the very centre of the nest, between you and me."

"To warm her, poor child," said the inconsistent mother, laughing and crying too; and Nelly ran off, stumbling in her way against Mrs. Everard, her mother's friend, whom the rest of the family were not fond of. "Do not knock me down, Ellinor," said that lady, giving Nelly a kiss, which she received without enthusiasm. Where was Nelly going? Straight up stairs without a pause to the little room which, already in her own mind, she too had destined to her unknown cousin. She went and looked at it with her head on one side, contemplating the little bed, which was decked with faded chintz, and the paper, which was somewhat dingy, and the carpet, which was so worn as to bear little trace of its original pattern. "This will never do," Nelly said to herself. Her imagination, which was a very lively and sprightly imagination, instantly set off on a voyage of discovery through the house to make up what was wanting. She seized, always in her thoughts, upon here a picture, and there a set of shelves, and rooted out from the lumber-room the tiniest of easy chairs, and made up her mind as to the hangings. I do not mean to say that this was all pure kindness. To tell the truth, Nelly liked the job. The arrangement of the room, and its conversion out of a dingy receptacle for a nursery maid to a bower for a young lady, was the most delightful occupation to her. Did not some one say that a lady had lately set herself up in business as a house decorator? Ellinor Eastwood would have been her apprentice, her journeywoman, with all her heart.

It will be apparent from this that though the first idea of the new arrival startled both mother and daughter, the orphan was not likely to have a cold or unkindly reception. So much the reverse indeed was this to the real case, that by the time Mrs. Eastwood had confided all to her friend she herself was in high excitement and expectation of her unknown niece. Mrs. Everard had condoled with her on the burden, the responsibility, the trouble, every one of which words added to the force of the revulsion in her kindly and simple soul. "God forgive me, Nelly," she said, when her daughter reappeared in the twilight, "if I thought my own sister's child a burden, or shrank from the responsibility of taking care of my own flesh and blood. It seemed to hurt me when she said such things. She must have thought that was how I felt about it; when, Heaven knows, the very reverse——"

"It was just like her, mamma," said Nelly.

"My dear, none of you are just to poor Mrs. Everard," said the *mother, driven* back upon herself. She dared not grumble ever so

little at this friend of her bosom without giving occasion, so to speak, to the Adversary to blaspheme. Therefore for the sake of peace she gulped down a great many of her friend's opinions without venturing to say how much she disagreed with them. The two were sitting there, consulting over the fire, when Frederick came in. There were no lights in the room, the shutters were not closed, nor even the blinds drawn, and the trees were dimly discernible like processions of ghosts in the dim air outside. That still world outside, looking in through the window, was somewhat eerie and dreary; when it caught Mrs. Eastwood's eye she was apt to get nervous, and declare that there was somebody in the grounds, and that she saw a face looking in. But this evening she had other things to think of. Frederick, however, as he came in, felt a shadow of his mother's superstitions and alarms. The glimmering dark outside seemed to him full of possible dangers. "Why don't you have the lamps lighted, and shut up the windows?" he said. "I can't understand your liking for the firelight, mother. One can't see to do anything, and anybody that chooses can see in."

"We don't want to do anything, and we don't care who sees us," said Nelly, who was sometimes saucy to her elder brother.

"Don't wrangle, children: we were discussing something which will startle you very much, Frederick, as it did me. It will make quite a change in everything. Perhaps Frederick will feel it least, being out all day; but we must all feel it," said Mrs. Eastwood. Frederick seated himself with his face to the window with a certain air of endurance. He did not like the firelight flashing over him, and revealing what he might happen to be thinking. Frederick liked to keep his thoughts to himself; to tell just as much as he liked, and no more. He put his hands into his pockets, and gave a half perceptible shrug to his shoulders. He did not expect to be at all startled. "A change in the fashion, I suppose," he said to himself. He was supposed to be very fond of home, and a most domestic young man; and this was one of the ways in which he indemnified himself for the good character which he took pains to keep up.

They told him the story from beginning to end, and he was not startled; but he was interested, which was a great deal more than he expected to be. When the lamp was brought in he got the letter; but did not make very much of that, for to Ellinor's great gratification he could not read it. It was written in Italian, as we have said. Now, Mrs. Eastwood was the only person in the house who knew Italian, though Nelly herself could spell it out. The mother was rather proud of her accomplishment. She had lived in Italy in her youth, and had never ceased to regard that fact as one of the great things in her life. It was with a thrill of pleasure that she read the letter over, translating it word by word. And it was something to have moved Frederick to such interest. He

entered into the discussion afterwards with warmth, and gave his advice with that practical good sense which his mother always admired, though she was not unaware that it sometimes failed him in his own affairs. "She cannot come here by herself," he said; "some one must go and fetch her. You can't allow a girl of that age to travel alone."

"That is quite true, Frederick," said Mrs. Eastwood; "how odd I should never have thought of it before. Of course, she could not travel alone. Dear, dear, what must we do? I cannot go myself, and leave you all to your own devices. Could I send Brownlow, I wonder; or old Alice ——?"

"Brownlow would never find his way to Pisa. He would break down long before he got there. And old Alice, what good could she do—an old woman?"

"She travelled with me," said Mrs. Eastwood, with modest pride. "Wherever I went she went. She learned a little of the language too. She would take very good care of her. Whom else can I send? Dick is too young, and too busy about his examination."

"If you will pay me well I don't mind going myself," said Frederick, stroking his moustache, and thus concealing a smile which lurked about the corners of his mouth.

"You, Frederick? It is very good of you to think of it. I never thought of you. What a pity we cannot make a party, and all go!" said Mrs. Eastwood. "To be sure that would cost a good deal. I would pay your expenses, of course, my dear, if you could make up your mind to go. That would, no doubt, be the nicest way of all. Yes; and although it is a melancholy occasion, it would be a little change for you too. You have been looking rather pale lately, Frederick."

"Yes, I have been looking pale," he said, with a little laugh, "and feeling pale. I'll go. I don't care much for the melancholy of the occasion, and I should like the change. To be sure, I am not much like old Alice; if the little girl wants a nursemaid I might be awkward ——"

"She is sixteen," said Mrs. Eastwood. Nelly made no remark; but she watched her brother with a scrutiny he did not quite like.

"Do you see anything extraordinary about me, Nell, that you stare at me like that?" he said, with a little irritation.

"Oh, nothing extraordinary," said Ellinor. There was a frequent bickering between the two, which made the mother uncomfortable sometimes. "I was thinking you must want a change very much to be so ready to officiate as a nursemaid."

"I do want a change," he said.

"Don't wrangle, my dear children," said their mother; "what is the use of wrangling? You have always done it since you were *babies.* Nelly, I wish you were not so fond of having the last *word.*"

"I did not have the last word this time," said Nelly hastily, under her breath.

"For, if you will think of it, it is very good of Frederick to bestow so much interest on a poor lonely little girl. Neither you nor I, Nelly, though we are women, and ought to have more feeling, ever thought of going to fetch her. The thing is, can you get leave, Frederick? You had your two months in the autumn, and then you had Christmas, and you have been out of town very often, you know, for three days. Can you have leave again so soon? You must take care not to hurt yourself in the office."

"Oh, I can manage; I am not afraid of the office," he said; but at this moment Brownlow rung the bell solemnly, meaning that it was time to dress. When they sat down to dinner together, four of them—for Dick had come in in the meantime—they were as handsome a young family party as could be seen. The table was bright with such flowers as were to be had; well lighted, well served. Perhaps of all the party Frederick was the most strictly handsome. He had a somewhat long face, with a melancholy look, which a great many people found interesting—a Charles I. look some ladies said; and he cultivated a small beard, which was slightly peaked, and kept up this resemblance. His features were very regular: and his fine dark brown hair longer than men usually wear it. He was very particular in his dress, and had delicate hands, shapely and white. He looked like a man to whom something would happen, the same ladies said who found out his resemblance to Charles I. There was one thing about him, however, that few people remarked at first sight; for he was aware of it, and did his best to conceal the defect of which he was conscious. He was not fond of meeting a direct look. This did not show itself by any vulgar shiftiness of look, or downright evasion of other people's eyes. He faced the world boldly enough, forcing himself to do it. There was, however, a subtle hesitation, a dislike to do it, which affected people strangely who found this peculiarity out; it affected them with a certain vague doubtfulness, not strong enough to be called suspicion. This failing it was, undefined and undefinable, which attracted Nelly's eyes so often to her brother's face, and produced the "wrangling" which Mrs. Eastwood protested against. Nelly had, without quite knowing it, a wondering curiosity about Frederick; though he was her brother, she had not found him out.

"What's the new girl's name?" said Dick, who was exactly like all the other young men going in for examinations who abound in English society, and perhaps scarcely impress the general mind so much as their universal information gives them a right to do. He was not great in conversation, and he was fond of asking questions. Some people thought it was an admirable omen of his future success. It there was a new point to be found out in an exhausted topic, a new detail or particular (for Dick was very practical) which no one

had investigated, one of his questions was sure to hit the mark. And it was wonderful, seeing the interest all young persons take in proper names, that this important inquiry had been left to him. "You talk of her as the little girl, and the cousin, and so forth; ain't she possessed of a name?"

"To be sure; what *is* her name?" cried Nelly promptly.

Mrs. Eastwood went back into the recesses of her memory. She knew it was a great family name in the branch of the Vanes to which her brother-in-law belonged. It was something very unlike him; that she remembered: very much unlike him; for she recollected quite well thinking so when she heard it first. Not Angel; oh, no, though that was pretty, and quite the reverse of the father. No. Now she recollected. Innocent—that was the name.

"Innocent!" they all said, repeating it one after another all round the table. It impressed the family somehow, and made Mrs. Eastwood—I cannot tell you exactly for what reason—cry a little. There was something that went to her kind heart in the name.

And two days after Frederick started for the Continent, to bring the orphan home.

CHAPTER III.

THE FAMILY.

A BRIGHT spring morning, sharp and cold, but with floods of sunshine everywhere—sunshine on the grass, turning the delicate rime into a network of pearls, and glittering along all the bare branches, where the brown buds were beginning to swell—colder than autumn, almost colder than winter, but with a different sentiment in the air. Spring cold is like the poverty of a poor man who has had a fortune left him—better days are coming; the trees felt this already, though their buds were pinched, and Nelly felt it as she went out with her garden gloves on, and a pair of scissors. What did she expect to find in the garden, do you ask? Nothing in the garden, where the crocuses had scarcely awakened to the fact that the sun was up and calling them; but away at the end of the lawn, among the roots of that transept of lime trees which crossed the avenue of big elms, there were hosts of hardy little snowdrops peeping up among the half-frozen grass, and growing in handfuls as Nature bade them. By what sweet piece of good fortune this came to be, I cannot tell; but so it was. Nelly herself, in a jacket *trimmed with white* fur, was too bright to be like her snowdrops.

She ran up and down the long avenue to warm her delicate little toes. It was a better way than sitting over the fire. In the little open space before the garden door, Dick, with a book in his coat pocket, was doing what he could to inform the mind of Winks. Dick was supposed to get up at seven to improve his own mind, and, I presume, he believed that the book in his pocket did him some good by mere contact, if nothing else. He had read, at most, one page of it, at the expense of I don't know how many yawns, but now his soul was set on the more congenial task of teaching Winks to carry a musket and stand on guard. Winks looked at the stick which had fallen from his unwilling paws, sniffing at it with a certain cynical disbelief in the supposed weapon. He was a very dark-coloured Skye, almost black, and had a way of grinning at Dick with all his white teeth displayed from his black lips, in a satirical smile which incensed his instructor greatly. Winks had as great objections to being instructed as Dick had himself, but, being above those prudential reasons which induced his young master to smother his feelings, the four-footed neophyte had distinctly the advantage. He did not believe in the feigned fire-arm, and words could not have expressed the good-humoured disdain with which he wagged his tail. "You think this is a gun, I suppose," Winks's tail said; "but I who am your intellectual superior am not to be taken in. Take up that bit of wood in my paws as if I was a mountebank! Not if I know it." "Sit up, sir, sit up," said Dick in a passion. Winks only smiled the more and wagged his tail. But the lesson, though it amused his cynical humour, began to bore him. All at once he put his head on one side, and pricked up his ears, responding to some imaginary call. The pantomime was far cleverer than anything Dick was capable of. "I think I hear my mistress calling me," Winks said in the plainest English; but he was too clever to escape at once. He paused, contemplative, consulting heaven and earth. "Did I hear my mistress call?" Then suddenly once more came the imaginary summons. "Distressed I am sure, beyond all measure, to leave you," the polite dog said, with a final wag of his tail, triumphant, yet deprecating. "Confound the little brute!" cried Dick, indignant; and Winks chuckled as he ran off on three legs, pretending to be all eagerness. "Confound the little beast!" repeated the boy; "Nelly, come here, and don't dance about in that aggravating way;—just when I thought he had got hold of a new trick!"

"Winks is a great deal too clever to do tricks," said Nelly.

"Yes, he is as knowing as I am," said innocent Dick. "I wonder now if there is any truth in that stuff about transmigration. He must have been an actor, that brute. I don't believe my mother called a bit. I don't believe she is downstairs yet—cunning little beast! What a jolly lot of snowdrops, Nelly! Are you going in? It's not nine yet. Come round the walk, I want to speak to

you. Oh what an awful bore is this exam.!" said Dick, with a deep sigh. "Now I put it to you, Nell, in the spirit of fairness, how can a fellow be expected to do mathematics before breakfast? It is bad enough when you have been worked up to it, and supported; but at eight o'clock in the morning, without so much as a cup of coffee! What are men supposed to be made of? I am sure it never was so in the old times."

"Much you know about it," said Nelly. "When I was at school, and much younger than you, I had to get up and practise for an hour and a half before breakfast—cold fingers and cold keys —and not even a fire."

"Oh, as for that," said Dick, "of course I never minded getting up at Eton; all the other fellows did it, and for one thing, the masters were punished just as much as we were, and looked just as blue. But when you are all of you in your comfortable beds, and only me at work!"

"If that was all, I should not mind in the least getting up and sitting with you," said Nelly; "but then we should only chatter, and no work would be done. And if you work hard, you know it will soon be over."

"Soon over? yes, till the next one," said Dick the disconsolate; "and then India at the end. There's Frederick now, a lazy beggar, comes down at ten o'clock, and everybody thinks it quite right. Why should there be such a difference between him and me? You're a girl, and don't count; but why should he be in clover at the Sealing Wax Office, while I am to be sent to India?"

"Frederick will never get rich in the Sealing Wax Office, but you may in India. Besides, you know," said Nelly, who was impressionable on this point, though she did not altogether trust her elder brother, "he would have been in the Church had he not been too conscientious. Quantities of men go into the Church without thinking what they are doing; but Frederick had scruples—he had doubts even on some points——"

"Much anybody would care if I had doubts," said Dick; "if I were to set up opinions, Nell——"

But this was more than Nelly's gravity could stand. The idea of Dick having opinions, and the injured look with which he announced the probable indifference of the world to them, sent his sister off into that *fou rire* which no one can stop. "I will race you to the end of the walk," she said, trying to subdue herself; and, undismayed by the indifference thus shown to his metaphysical difficulties, Dick accepted the challenge. He allowed her to dart past him with all a boy's contempt, He regarded her, indeed, with something of the same sentiment with which Winks had regarded him. "Girls spend all their strength at the first outset," Dick said composedly, going steadily on with his squared elbows. "They're *like greased* lightning for ten yards or so, and then they're done—

like you, Nell," he said, passing her when she paused, panting, to take breath. She had made a hard fight for it, however. She had run to within a few yards of the goal before she allowed herself to be beaten. Dick immediately began a lecture to her upon the deficiency of feminine performances, which was perhaps too technical for these pages, but so like many lectures on the same subject that the reader will have little difficulty in imagining it. "You never can 'stay,'" was the conclusion, made with much patronizing good-humour. Altogether, it was apparent that Dick's general opinion of his sister coincided wonderfully with Winks's opinion of himself. Great wits jump.

"Miss Ellinor, your mamma has been a-waiting breakfast this half-hour," said Brownlow solemnly, addressing them from the end of the walk. Brownlow was large and stout, and filled up the vista formed by the branches. They had known his sway all their lives, and they laughed at him between themselves; but the young Eastwoods had not yet learned to disobey Brownlow. They put themselves in motion with the utmost docility. "We are coming directly," said Nelly, running to pick up her basket with the snowdrops. Even Frederick did instinctively what Brownlow told him. The brother and sister went on to the house, following the large black shadow which moved with dignity before them. "What an awful old bore he is," said Dick: "look here, Nell, what will you bet that I couldn't hit that big red ear of his with this chestnut? One, two, three——"

"Oh, don't, Dick, for heaven's sake!" said Nelly, catching his hand; "though he is an old bore. I wonder how it is that we have none but old servants? Mamma prefers them, I suppose; though Frederick, I know, would like another cook, and I,—oh, no, I couldn't part with old Alice. What a wretch I am to think of it! But she never can help one to a new way of doing one's hair."

"I always do my hair exactly the same," said Dick. "I never require any one to help me."

"Oh, you!" said Nelly taking her revenge; "who cares how a boy looks?" And thus they went in, breathing youth, and fun, and nonsense, and mischief. Mrs. Eastwood stood warming her hands by the fire, but Dick and Nelly put themselves on the other side of the table. Their young blood was dancing, their young limbs too light to be touched by the cold.

"I wonder where Frederick will be by this time; I wonder when he will reach Pisa," said the mother. "I suppose it is not to be expected that a young man would go right through Paris without stopping. But when I think of that poor little thing all alone——"

"The wind blew nice and strong last night," said Dick; "it would be pleasant in the Channel. I say, mamma, I hope Frederick liked it. How queer he would look this morning! What a thing it is not to be able *to stand* a breeze at sea! You should have

seen us off the Needles in the last equinoctial, in old Summerdale's yacht."

"Don't tell me about it," said Mrs. Eastwood, closing her eyes and setting down her tea-cup. "Some of these days you will hear that Mr. Summerdale and his yacht have gone to the bottom: and I am sure, though I would not be uncharitable to any man, I think he deserves it: carrying boys away in a storm without the knowledge of their people. I thought I should have died."

"I was a good bit more like dying, and I did not mind," cried Dick. "It was glorious. The noise, so that you couldn't hear yourself talk, and the excitement, and the confusion, and the danger! Hadn't we just a squeak for it? It was gloriously jolly," cried Dick, rubbing his hands at the recollection. He looked so wickedly pleased with the escapade that his mother could not help snubbing him on the spot.

"I hope you have got a great deal of work done this morning. Alice tells me you got up directly when you were called. And you must remember, Dick, how very short the time is getting," she said, in her softest tones. "I would not for the world deprive you of a single advantage; but seven-and-sixpence an hour is a very great deal to pay unless you take the full advantage of it. And now I shall have another child to provide for," Mrs. Eastwood added, sighing faintly. Poor Dick's random mood was over. He said something about mathematics in general which was not complimentary to that lofty science.

"If it was to be of any use to a fellow after I should not mind," he said. "It is the doing it all for no good that riles one. If I were to be mathematical master somewhere, or head accountant, or even a bookkeeping fellow——. You need not cry 'Oh, oh!' You ain't in Parliament, Nell, and never can be; that's a comfort. Girls ought to talk of things they understand. I don't interfere with your fiddle-de-jigs. That's what discourages a fellow. Besides, mathematics are horribly hard; ladies that never opened a Euclid," said Dick, with dignity, "are quite incapable of forming an idea."

"They tell the best in the examination," said Mrs. Eastwood. "When you have passed you will have no more trouble with them. But we must not forget how many marks there are for mathematics; and you must not be discouraged, Dick. But you know, children, if we are to have a new member in the family, we shall require to think of economy more than ever. I do not see anything we can actually put down," the mother said, with deliberation, and a sigh to the memory of the carriage. "The only thing I could think of was the fires in our bedrooms, and really that would not be good for your healths. But we must be generally economical. And the very first principle of economy is making the best use of what we have. So recollect, Dick."

"*I'm going,* mamma," he said, and pulled the book out of his

coat pocket which had been keeping him company all the morning. Mrs. Eastwood followed him to the door with her kind eyes.

"I really think, though he is such a harum-scarum, that he is doing his work, poor boy," she said, with that fond maternal confidence which is often so indifferently deserved.

"Yes, yes, mamma," cried Nelly, with some impatience, not feeling all the interest in the subject her mother did. "But never mind Dick, he'll do very well, I daresay. Come and see what I want to have done to the little room."

The Elms was an old-fashioned house. It was built, as houses in England are rarely built now-a-days, in those suites of rooms which are so general on the Continent. Mrs. Eastwood's room occupied the whole width of the wing. It had an alcove, which was like an inner room, for the bed, and abundance of space for reading tables and writing tables, and sofas and book-cases in the rest of the spacious chamber, which was like a French room in every way, with its dressing-closet opening from the alcove, and all the less beautiful accessories of the toilet kept well out of sight. Ellinor's room opened from her mother's, and opening from that again was the little room which was to be prepared for the newcomer. Already it was all pulled to pieces by Nelly's commands, and under her supervision; and a brisk little workwoman sat in Nelly's own chamber surrounded by billows of bright new chintz, with a running pattern of rose buds and fern leaves. A tall old woman, in a black gown and cap, stood beside this artist, advising it seemed and disapproving. Ellinor stopped with the anxious and indeed servile politeness of fear to speak to this personage. "How kind of you, Alice, to come and help," she said; "I hope you like the chintz. Don't you think we shall make the room look nice after all, when it has been papered and cleaned?"

"There's nothing to be said against the room," said Alice, in a Scotch accent, and with a solemnity of tone that spoke more than words.

"And then we shall all be together. It will be very handy for everything," said Nelly, with a sickly smile, trying to bear up; "all the ladies of the family——"

"I would like to speak a word to your mamma about that," said Alice. She pronounced the word "Mammaw," and somehow those broad vowels added ten-fold weight—or so, at least, Ellinor thought—to the speech.

"Mamma has gone into the little room," said Nelly, with an effort. Mrs. Eastwood was a very persuadable woman, and she looked still more persuadable than she was. Most people thought they themselves could influence her to anything, unless, indeed, some one else had forestalled them; and, to tell the truth, even her own family attributed to Mrs. Everard, or failing her to Alice, everything in their mother's conduct which was not attributable to

their own sage advices. It required a more subtle observer than Nelly to make out that her mother had in reality a great deal of her own way; therefore she was deeply alarmed by Alice's unfriendly looks, and followed her into the little room with but slightly disguised terror.

"Alice is in a bad humour," she whispered to her mother; "You won't mind what she says? She thinks the new paper and the chintz are extravagant. Don't listen to her, mamma."

"So they are," said Mrs. Eastwood, shaking her head. She was fond of pretty paper and pretty chintz, and of change and novelty. She liked furnishing a room almost as well as her daughter did, and she thought she had "taste." Therefore she had defences against any attack on that side of the question, which Ellinor had not dreamt of. However, even Nelly was startled and taken aback by the unexpected line taken by Alice, who looked as if she might have something very important to say.

"You remember Miss Isabel, mem?" was what she said, looking her mistress full in the face.

"Dear me, Alice, what a question! Remember my sister?" cried Mrs. Eastwood, turning abruptly away from the paper and chintz.

"It's a queer question to ask," said Alice, with a grim smile; "but dinna go too fast. You mind your sister, and yet you are going to put her child—her only child—here in a room next to your own, next to Miss Ellinor's? Between mother and daughter? That's where you place Miss Isabel's bairn?"

"Alice!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, almost angrily. She looked at Nelly's wondering face and then at her maid with a half-frightened, half-threatening gesture. She was annoyed, but she was startled too.

"I say it before Miss Ellinor that you may not do it with your eyes shut," said Alice. "I'm only a servant, with no right to interfere; but I cannot stand by, and no say a word. I'm no in favour of it," she cried, turning round. "It would be best to provide for her, and no bring her home; but if you will bring her home—and, mem, you are always wilful, though nobody thinks so—put her in any place but here."

"You are dreadfully prejudiced, Alice—dreadfully prejudiced!"

"Maybe I am; and, mem, you like your own way. We are none of us perfect. But your sister Isabel's bairn, the child of an ill father to the boot, should never come into my house. Maybe you think, mem, that the features of the mind are no transmitted? Poor leddy! Poor leddy! There's enough of her in your blood already without searching out of your way to find more."

Mrs. Eastwood grew crimson to her hair. "If you think any of my children resemble my sister, Alice, I can assure you you are *very much mistaken*," she said, walking up and down the little room

in her agitation. "Nelly, look here, you would think she meant something very dreadful. Your poor aunt Isabella was very secret in her way, and liked to make a mystery. She got me into some trouble when I was a girl through it. That was all. Why it should be remembered against her child, or change my natural affections, I can't imagine. Oh, I know you mean well, Alice, you mean well; but that does not make it a bit more pleasant. Put down those curtains and things, Nelly, put them down. I hate so much fuss. There is plenty of time. You are always so hasty and premature in everything. I am going to speak to cook. Don't trouble me about this any more."

"It is all your doing, Alice," said Ellinor, as her mother went away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FRIENDS OF THE FAMILY.

THIS mysterious hint did not dwell upon Ellinor's mind as it might have done in the mind of a young person less occupied. I am afraid she was of a superficial way of thinking at this period of her existence, and rather apt to believe that people who made themselves unpleasant, or suggested uncomfortable mysteries were "in a bad humour," or "put out about something;" which, indeed, is a very excellent and safe explanation of many of the unpleasant speeches we make to each other, but yet not always to be depended upon. Mrs. Eastwood was "put out" for the rest of the day, and would give no heed to any of Nelly's preparations; but, like the light-hearted soul she was, had thrown off the yoke by next morning. "Why should I take up Alice's opinions?" she said half to herself.

"Why, indeed?" cried Nelly, eager to assist in the emancipation.

"Alice is a good servant," Mrs. Eastwood continued; "most trustworthy, and as fond of you all as if you were her own" ("Sometimes she takes an odd way of showing it," interpolated Nelly), "and a great comfort to have about one; but she has a very narrow, old-fashioned way of looking at things; and why should I take up her superstitions, and act upon them?"

This speech was received with so much applause by her daughter, that Mrs. Eastwood immediately plunged into all the preparations which she had checked the day before; and the ladies had a shopping expedition that very morning, and bought a great many things they had not thought of to make

the room pretty. When people have "taste" and set their hearts upon making a room pretty, the operation is apt to become rather an expensive one; but this I must say, that mother and daughter most thoroughly enjoyed the work, and got at least value for their money in the pleasure it gave them. You will say that this was done more with the view of pleasing themselves than of showing regard to the poor little orphan who was to profit by all the luxuries provided; but human nature, so far as I know it, is a very complicated business, and has few impulses which are perfectly single and unmixed in their motives. They cudgelled their brains to think what she would like. They summoned up before them a picture of an art-loving, beauty-mad, Italian-born girl, unable to live without pictures and brightness. They went and roamed through all the Arundel Society collections to look for something from Pisa that would remind her of her home. They sacrificed a Raphael-print which had been hung in Mrs. Eastwood's own room, to her supposed necessities. Nelly made a careful selection of several *morceaux* of china, such as went to her own heart, to decorate the mantelshelf. I don't deny they were like two overgrown schoolgirls over a bigger kind of doll's house; but if you can be hard upon them for this admixture, I confess I cannot. When the room was finished, they went and looked at it three or four times in a day admiring it. They did not know anything about the future inmate, what sort of soul it might be who was coming to share their nest, to be received into their most intimate companionship. They decked the room according to a preconceived impression of her character; and then they drew another more definite sketch of her character, in accordance with the room. Thus they created their Innocent, these two women; and how far she resembled the real Innocent the reader will shortly see.

Their life, however, in the meantime was not all engrossed in this occupation. The Eastwoods were a popular family. They "went out" a good deal, even in the dead season of the year, when fashion is not, and nobody, so to speak, is in town. There are a very tolerable amount of people in town even in November and December. There are all the law people of every degree; there are all the people in public offices, especially those who are married. Among these two classes there are, the reader will perhaps not be surprised to hear, many, very many, excellent, highly-bred, well-connected persons who actually *live in London*. I am aware that in fashionable literature this fact is scarcely admitted, and everybody who is anybody is believed to visit town only during the season. But the great majority of the English nation consists of people who work more or less for their living, and of these a large number are always in London. The society of the Eastwoods consisted of this class. *To be sure*, Nelly had appeared at Lady Altamont's ball, in

the very best of society, the year she came out; and invitations did still arrive now and then during the season from that supernal sphere. But these occasional flights into the higher heavens did not interfere with the natural society which surrounded the Eastwoods for at least nine months of the year, from November, say, to July. Here were Nelly's young friends, and Mrs. Eastwood's old ones; the advisers of the elder lady and the lovers of the younger. As for advisers, Mrs. Eastwood was very well off. She had a great many of them, and each fitted with his or her office. Mrs. Everard was, as it were, adviser-in-chief, privy councillor, keeper of the conscience, to her friend, who told her almost, if not quite, every thing in which she was concerned. Under this great domestic officer there was Mr. Parchemin, once a great Chamber counsel, noted for his penetration into delicate cases of all kinds, who had retired into profound study of the art of investment, which he practised only for the benefit of his friends. He was for the Finance department. The Rector of the parish, who had once been a highly successful master in a public school, was her general adviser in respect to "the boys," selecting "coaches" for Dick, and "keeping an eye" upon him, and "taking an interest" in Jenny during the holidays. Mrs. Eastwood's third counsellor had, I am sorry to say, interested motives. He was a certain Major Railton, in one of the Scientific Corps, and was handy man to the household—for a consideration, which was Nelly. He had the hardest work of all the three—advice was less wanted from him than assistance. He never went so far as his club, poor man, or entered Bond Street, without a commission. He recommended tradespeople, and superintended, or at least inspected, all the repairs done on the old house, besides suggesting improvements, which had to be carried out under his eye. Lastly, there was Mrs. Eastwood's religious adviser, or rather advisers; there were two of them, and they were both ladies,—one, a sister belonging to one of the many sisterhoods now existing in the English Church; and the other an old lady from the north of Ireland, with all the Protestantism peculiar to that privileged region. With this body of defenders Mrs. Eastwood moved through life, not so heavily burdened after all as might be supposed. She had a ready way of relieving herself when she felt the yoke. Though she religiously asked their advice on all their special topics, and would even go so far as to acquiesce in their views, and thank them with tears in her eyes for being so good to her, she generally after all took her own way, which simplified matters amazingly. Since this was the case even with her privy councillor, the friend of her bosom, it is not to be wondered at if the others were used in the same way. Mr. Parchemin was the one whose advice she took most steadily, for she was deeply conscious that she knew nothing of business; and Mr. Brotherton, the clergyman, who was the patron saint of the boys, was probably the

one she minded least, for an exactly opposite reason. But the curious thing was, that even in neglecting their advice, she never alienated her counsellors—I suspect because our vanity is more entirely flattered by being consulted than our pride is hurt by having our counsel tacitly rejected. So much for the elder lady's share. Nelly, on her side, had a host of friends of her own age, with whom she was very popular, but no one who was exactly Pythias to her Damon, for the reason that she was old-fashioned enough to make her mother her chief companion. Let us clear the stage, however, for something more important than a female Pythias. Nelly had—who can doubt it?—or her right to admission into these pages would have been very slight, a lover, for whom the trumpets are now preparing to sound.

Let us pause, however, for one moment to note a fact which is certainly curious. We all know the statistics that prove beyond possibility of doubt that there are more women than men in the world—or, at least, in the English world—and that, in the natural course of events, only three-fourths, or four-fifths, or some other mysterious proportion, of Englishwomen can ever attain the supreme glory and felicity of being married. Now, I do not dare to contradict figures. I have too much respect—not to say awe—of them. I only wish to ask, in all humility, how does it then happen that a great many women are offered the choice of two or three husbands, and that almost every nice young girl one knows has to shape her ways warily in certain complications of circumstances, so as to keep every thing smooth between some two, at least, who devote to her the homage of their attentions? I do not expect that any statistician will take the trouble to answer this question, but it is one deeply calculated to increase the mingled faith, incredulity, terror, and contempt with which I, like most people, regard that inexorable science. Nelly Eastwood was one of these anomalies and practical contradictions to all received law. She had no idea that she was flying in the face of statistics, or doing her best to stultify the most beautiful lines of figures. Major Railton, of whom we have already spoken, was over thirty, which Nelly, not quite twenty, thought rather old; but the other pretendant for Nelly's favour was not old. He was one of the class which has taken the place now-a-days of the knights and captains, the heroes of the period. Not a conquering soldier or bold adventurer—a young barrister lately called to exercise that noble faculty, and prove black to be white and white black to the satisfaction of a British jury; *tant soit peu* journalist, ready with his pen, ready with his tongue; up, as the slang goes, to anything. His name was Molyneux, and his position as a briefless barrister was much modified by the fact that he was the son of the well-known Mr. Molyneux, whose fame and success at the bar had already indicated him as one of the next new judges as soon as any piece of *judicial ermine fell* vacant. This changed in the most wonderful

way the position of Ernest Molyneux, upon whose prospects no mother could frown, though indeed he had nothing, and earned just enough to pay his tailor's bills. Major Railton, too, was somewhat literary, as indeed most men are now-a-days. When anything was going on in the military world, he was good enough to communicate it to the public through the medium of the *Daily Treasury*. He had even been sent out by that paper on one or two occasions as its special correspondent. Naturally, he took a view of professional matters entirely opposed to the view taken by the correspondent of the *Jupiter*. The Major's productions were chiefly descriptive, and interspersed with anecdote. The barrister's were metaphysical, and of a very superior mental quality. He was fond of theology, when he could get at it, and of settling everything over again on a new basis. These were the two gentlemen who happened to meet in the drawing-room at The Elms, on one of these chilly afternoons, at the fire-light hour. This fashion of sitting without lights was one which both of them rather objected to, though they dared not express their sentiments freely, as on a former occasion Frederick Eastwood had not hesitated to do. On a little table which stood before the fire was the tea-tray, with its sparkling china and little quaint old silver tea-pot, which glittered, too, in the ruddy light. This was the highest light in the darkling scene. Major Railton was seated quite in the shadow, near Mrs. Eastwood, to whom he had been discoursing, in his capacity as out-door adviser, about the state of the coachhouse. Young Molyneux was moving about the centre of the room, in the way some men have, talking to Nelly, and looking at any chance book or curious thing that might fall in his way. They had been hearing the story of the new cousin with polite interest, varying according to the nature of the men, and the intimacy and interest in the house which their respective positions enabled them to show.

"The stables are the worst," said the Major. "In one corner the rain is positively coming in; not to speak of the uninhabitable nature of the place, if you should want to use it, the property is positively deteriorated. It really must not be allowed to fall out of repair."

"There is no chance of my wanting to use it, Major; but, of course, if, as you say, the property is injured——. I am sure," said Mrs. Eastwood, "it is a great nuisance to be your own landlord; other people, I find, have all these things done for them."

"But other people pay rent, and may be turned out at a year's notice," said the Major.

"Oh, indeed, nobody is so foolish as to turn out a good tenant. Indeed, it is a very equivocal advantage to live in your own house. Constant taxes, constant repairs, and though everybody knows I have put down my carriage, obliged to spend money on my stables!

That," said Mrs. Eastwood emphatically, "is what I call an irony of fate."

"It is bad, it must be allowed," said Molyneux bursting in; his ear had been caught by the last words, which she pronounced more loudly than usual, with a true sense of the injury done her. "It is like a story I heard the other day of an unfortunate Austrian whose chateau was destroyed in the war. Just about the time the last fire smouldered out, he got his bill from the great furniture man at Vienna for the redecoration. It had just been finished before the Prussian guns went at it. There's irony for you! I don't suppose your friend Bismarck, Railton, will be so civil as to pay the bill."

"Nobody will pay my bill, I am sure," said Mrs. Eastwood, not quite relishing the introduction of a misfortune which overshadowed her own. "What a comfort it is, to be sure, that there is no more fighting in Italy. Frederick, I think, ought to be in Pisa by this time, and next week I hope we may have him back. What a difference in travelling since my day! Then we went in our own carriages from Marseilles, going round the coast, and taking weeks to it. Nelly, don't you think we might have lights?"

"Presently, mamma; don't you want to know about my new cousin, a new young lady coming out of the unknown?" said Nelly. "If I visited in a house where any one so very new was about to appear, I should be dying of curiosity. Mr. Molyneux, you are full of imagination, or at least so the newspapers say; help me to make out what she will be like. Born in Italy; sixteen; named Innocent. Here are the facts. Now tell me what you think, and then you shall have my idea."

"I hope she will be like her relations, whom we know," said Major Railton gallantly: "and then the firmament will have another star."

"That is pretty, but it is vague," said Nelly, "and I have heard something like it before. Mr. Molyneux——"

"Who said I was full of imagination?" said Molyneux, feeling entitled to draw a chair near her. "Now if there is one thing I pride myself on, it is that subordination of fancy to reason which is characteristic, Miss Eastwood, of a well-regulated mind. Girls of sixteen are of two classes, so far as I have observed: honest bread-and-butter, which I rather like on the whole—or the shy and sentimental, which, when it is not too thin, has its attractions also. Miss Innocent, being Italian, &c., will probably belong to the last class. Now for your idea. I have said my say."

"My idea," said Nelly solemnly, turning her face towards him in the glow of the fire-light, which lighted up the soft round of her cheek, and fluttered about her pretty figure as if caressing her, "is *this: I have* been reading up 'Aurora Leigh.' Have you read

'Aurora Leigh'? Perhaps you do not condescend to anything merely English, and written by a woman——"

"Pardon, this is criticism and accusation, not your idea."

"I will send Birkson to-morrow," said the Major in his corner, "he is the man I always employ. He can give an estimate at least, and I will cast an eye over it the next time I see you. I fear you must do it, though I hate all expense that can be spared."

"And such unnecessary expense," sighed Mrs. Eastwood.

"Well, then," resumed Nelly, flushing with excitement, "this is how it will be—it is constantly so in books, and I suppose you writers ought to know. She will be beautiful, she will be clever, far cleverer than anybody here. She will flash upon us in our dull little house like a princess. Mamma and I will be quenched altogether. She will be the centre of everything. When you come to call, you will all make a circle round her to hear her talk, or to hear her sing, or just to look at her, she will be so lovely. Probably she will sing like an angel,—everybody does who comes from Italy. Her father will have taught her all sorts of out-of-the-way things,—Greek and Latin, and astrology, and I don't know what. Poor mamma and I will try to keep her down, you know, and be something still in our own house."

"Why, Nelly, what wild nonsense are you talking? Do stop your romancing, and ring for the lights."

"Presently, mamma! We will be unkind to her, we will leave her at home when we go out, we will make her sit up in the old schoolroom. I hope we will have strength of mind to give her enough to eat. But whatever we do she will shine like a star, as Major Railton beautifully says. She will outshine us in goodness as well as in everything else. She will cast us into the shade; we shall feel ourselves the meanest, and the wretchedest, and the stupidest, and the ugliest——"

"Nelly, Nelly, are you going crazy? What can you mean?"

"There's imagination for you!" cried Molyneux; "invention, the most daring fancy. I did not know you were a poet. 'Aurora Leigh' is nothing to it, nor even 'Cinderella.' Now, I confess my curiosity is awakened. When is this course of cruelty to begin?"

"Yes, mamma, it is getting quite night," cried Nelly, springing up. "We have been left long enough in the dark, haven't we? Have you settled about the stables? Oh, Major Railton, if you would be so very good! It is only a book I want. A book is a simple sort of commission. Now please tell me if it is troublesome, for of course I could order it at Clarke's; but then it would not come for a week. We are supposed to be in London here, but it is a week's post to Regent Street."

"What is the good of me but to run errands?" said the gallant Major, changing his seat in the corner for another chair more near

to Nelly. "I like it. Good heavens, I beg your pardon, Winks, how was I to see you were there?"

Winks jumped down out of the chair on which he had been lying, in the highest dudgeon; he took no notice of the criminal. Too much a gentleman to say anything uncivil beyond the momentary snap and snarl which betrayed his disinclination to be sat upon, a thing abhorrent both to dogs and men, he hobbled to the rug, holding up one paw with a demonstration of patient suffering, which might have melted the hardest heart. It was Winks's favourite paw which he never ran upon under any circumstances; but this was a little fact which he did not mention. He took it to the matting, and licked it, and made much of it, with a heroic abstinence from any complaint. The Major went down on his knees, and felt the injured limb carefully, with every expression of penitence. "The bone is not hurt, I assure you," he said tenderly, half to Winks and half to his mistress. The sufferer turned his head aside during this examination, to conceal, I believe, the smile upon his countenance.

"He is a little humbug," said Mrs. Eastwood, but she was relieved to know there was not much the matter. As for young Molyneux, he took a base advantage of the incident.

"Railton is getting rather stout," he whispered aside to Nelly, "I don't wonder Winks did not like it. He is broadening, one can't deny it. Look what a shadow he throws, blotting out you and me together." And, indeed, the excellent Major, foreshortened by the firelight, did throw a portentous shade up to the very ceiling. And Nelly laughed out like a foolish girl, unable to restrain herself, and could give no account of her laughter; but declared it was because of Winks, who was an accomplished actor, and had taken the Major in. "Winks, come, I am going upstairs," she cried; upon which the invalid bounded from the rug, nearly upsetting the Major. And then Brownlow came in with the two lamps, and the hour of reception was over. Major Railton, however, lingered still for a last word about the stables, while young Molyneux was forced to go away. To have a settled appointment, so to speak, about the house in which dwells the young lady of your affections is an unquestionable advantage. It secures the last word.

"Nelly, how could you talk in that wild way?" cried Mrs. Eastwood when both were gone. "There is nothing men like so much as to think that women are jealous of each other. It flatters their vanity. They will think you meant every word of all that nonsense, and a pretty account they will give of us to all our friends."

"I did mean it," said Nelly, "I was quite in earnest. If you will read 'Aurora Leigh' as I have been doing——"

"Aurora Fiddlestick," cried Mrs. Eastwood, which, after all, was no argument; "don't let me hear any more such nonsense. As if *any girl that was* ever born could alter one's position in one's

own house! I am surprised at you, Ellinor. Make haste now and dress; we are much later than usual in consequence of your foolish talk. I suppose I must go to this fresh expense about the stables after what the Major says," she added, with care on her brow; "though I am sure Frederick will no more be able to keep horses when I die than I am now. And I don't see why I should keep them up for remote posterity—my great grandson, perhaps, who, if he is able to afford it at all, should be able to build stables for himself. I don't think I will do it, Nelly. I will send for old Sclater to-morrow, and have the roof looked to. These men talk as if we were made of money, especially men who have the public money to fall back upon. It is very pleasant, I don't doubt, to see work done and places kept up when you never have any bills to pay."

This little speech was delivered partly on the stairs as Mrs. Eastwood went up to dress, followed by her daughter. Nelly, I am afraid, was not much interested about the stables, and made no reply; but she put her head into the little room before she began to dress, and contemplated it, admiring yet doubtful. She had been reading "Aurora Leigh" all the morning, and the poetry had gone to Nelly's head, as poetry is apt to do when one is twenty. She wondered if English nature, as represented by the elms and the lime trees, with no hills at all, not even a green slope for a background, would seem as tame to her cousin as English scenery in general had done to Aurora. Nelly herself had never yet been farther than Paris, and had seen no scenery to speak of. The blue spring sky and the primrose-covered grass,—the play of sunshine and shadow further on in the year through the silken green of the limes—the moonlight pouring down the avenue—filled her own heart with a flood of soft delight. That was because she knew no better, she argued humbly with herself; but the other, who had seen Alps and Apennines, and snowy peaks and Italian skies! "I wonder if she will think us tame too," Nelly said to herself with a little shiver, as she went back to her own room and applied herself to the work of dressing. She reflected that in books the stranger, the orphan, the dependent, generally has it all her own way; but that, at the same time, there was something to be said on the other side for the tame, stay-at-home people, who did their best to satisfy the poetic nature, even if they did not succeed. Perhaps Miss Leigh herself, Aurora's aunt, who had not bargained for a poet, might have had her story too. On the whole Nelly, having completed the little room, was somewhat depressed about its inmate. It was pretty, but she had not been able to give quite the ideal effect she had intended. In furnishing and decoration, as well as other matters, the highest ideal is not always the one that succeeds best.

CHAPTER V.

FREDERICK'S WAY.

FREDERICK EASTWOOD had leave for a fortnight from his office. He was not hardworked, as a rule. Leave was dispensed freely enough, without any very profound investigation into the urgent affairs which demanded it. The men at the Sealing Wax Office were something like their contemporaries of the Household Brigade, and were allowed much leisure to make up for the severe mental strain which their duties, so long as they lasted, imposed upon them. Therefore he had not much difficulty in getting free at this important family crisis. He left home the evening before his fortnight began, with a very pretty cheque in his purse which his mother had given him. Mrs. Eastwood's opinion was that, as Frederick was sacrificing himself to family duty, Frederick ought to have a recompense.

"You can buy yourself something with the rest," she said, smiling upon him with that confidence of being liberal and trustful which, perhaps because it is contrary to so many of her superstitions, always makes a woman pleased with herself.

"There are pretty alabaster things at Pisa," said Nelly; "you may buy us all something if you like."

Frederick shut up his pocket-book, as in other days men used to button their pockets. He went out of the house hastily, resolving to do neither one thing nor the other. They closed the door upon him tranquilly, feeling that it was Frederick's way, and that they knew precisely how he would conduct himself on this expedition. But the truth is that no soul more utterly unknown to that excellent family went out of all London that day. They knew absolutely nothing about him. The anticipations which made his eyes glow as soon as he was safe in his Hansom, and could look as he liked, would have been absolutely incomprehensible to his family. Could they have seen into his mind, they would have refused to believe in the reality of what they saw. I hope it may be in my power to reveal to the reader with less difficulty what Frederick Eastwood really was. He had a fine exterior—dainty, and delicate, and refined. To see him you would have imagined his faults to be faults of the mind; high temper, perhaps, irresolution and weakness in critical circumstances, intentions which were fundamentally good though often mistaken, and a wrong-headed obstinacy and self-opinion when he did decide upon any thing, which is quite compatible with irresolution in great matters. This is what the cursory observer would have supposed him to be; and this is what his *family thought* of him. He was not clever in managing his own *affairs, they knew;* he was undecided about matters which required

firmness, and obstinate about trifles. He had no idea of the magnitudes of differing objects, but would insist upon some trifling point in an argument while he yielded the great ones. All these faults, real or supposed, were in harmony with his looks, and with the impression he made upon most people who met him. A Charles the First sort of man—wrong-headed, melancholy, virtuous, meaning the very best but not always able to carry out his meaning, and now and then betrayed into subterfuge by very indecision. This was the manner in which he was regarded by his friends.

I am afraid this was not, however, at all the real state of affairs. It is difficult to describe the true condition of his mind without using what the newspapers call vulgar expressions, and without venturing upon ground little known to or studied by the writer of this history. I do not know after what fashion the artisan enjoys himself when, after a long spell of respectability, his wife informs me, weeping or indignant, that he has gone off "on the spree;" and still less do I know what experiences are gone through by a young gentleman of quality when, obeying the same impulse, he also breaks loose from decorum and plunges into occasional dissipation. There are other pens in plenty which can inform the curious reader; but for my part, though I may guess, I do not know. Frederick Eastwood, however, though he was rather a fine gentleman than otherwise, was as much subject to this influence as any undisciplined working man with good wages and rampant senses. This was the secret, the mystery, and, by consequence, the centre of his life. His training, his wishes, his pride, all the traditions of his own and his family's history, bound him to the only career which is not ruin for men in his condition—a life in accordance with the ordinary rules of virtue and respectability. He had not any of the great qualities which make society pardon an occasional aberration; nor was he rich enough to be vicious decorously, even had that been possible. Besides, he did not want to be permanently vicious, nor, indeed, to sin at all if he could have helped it. He felt the importance of character as highly as any man could feel it, and clung to his good repute with a tenacity all the more desperate that he alone was aware how much he now and then put it in peril. But that other impulse was as a fire within him—that impulse to burst away from all routine and self-control—to throw every restraint to the winds, and follow for a brief delirious interval only the wild suggestions of the senses, wherever they might lead him. Where they did lead him I have no intention of following. But this was the key to the somewhat strange and incomprehensible aspect which he presented to his fellows. He never got into mischief sociably with his contemporaries. They thought him on the whole rather a Puritan; though there were inevitable echoes of something against him wandering vaguely about his club and among the men who had been with him at the University. But all

that was known and seen of his life was so spotless and respectable that the whisper of hostility was hushed. The question why a young man so blameless should be often so moody, and always so uncommunicative, had been solved in the feminine world in the most romantic manner, by the theory that he was like Charles the First. But men did not take up this notion so readily. There were various strange "ways" about him which were very mysterious to his friends: a certain secrecy, in itself carefully concealed, and watchfulness, as of a man about whom something might some day be found out. When his fever fit was coming on, he would grow restless, shifty, anxious, declining his ordinary engagements, shutting himself up in his own room, morose with his family, and impatient of all usual intercouse. A headache, or a cold, or some other slight ailment, was the reason easily accepted by the innocent people about him—and at the very nick of time some invitation would arrive for a week's shooting, or other agreeable occupation, which would "set him up," everybody thought. Whether he was resisting the devil at these preliminary moments, or merely concocting plans by which he might get free and secure the opportunity of self-indulgence, I cannot tell. I believe, strange as it may seem to say it, that he was doing both.

But the devil got the best of the argument, as he generally does when what are called "the passions" are excited, and the craving for enjoyment, to which some natures are so susceptible, sets in. This curious byeway of the human mind is one which a great many of us have been forced to study much against our will: when all the desires of the mind seem set upon the better way, and sore repentance, religious feeling, and rational conviction of the fatal character of the indulgence, seem certainly to promise victory, but are all upset at the critical moment by that irresistible sense of the pleasure within reach, which overcomes at once all spiritual and all prudential considerations. Frederick Eastwood reasoned with himself, condemned himself, understood the whole situation; he even prayed, with tears, against the besetting sin, about the character of which he could have no doubt. But all the time that hankering after the delight of it lay in the background; with a corner of his mental eye, so to speak, he saw how best to attain the gratification, and with a rush snatched it. Recollections of the sweetness of it last time would flash across his mind, even at the very height of his resolution to avoid it next time. He knew all that could be said about those apples of Sodom, which are so beautiful to look at, but are as ashes in the mouth. This is one of the set things which preachers and sinners are alike ready to say together; but the fact is that a great many people like the taste of the ashes, as Frederick did. The pleasure of anticipating that mouthful had more force upon him than all the arguments which, with hot zeal, he had *so often* used to himself.

He had been wavering on the very edge of downfall when this mission to bring home Innocent came, as it were, in his way. He accepted it as—we cannot say a godsend, or a gift from heaven—but as an almost supernatural provision for his necessities, a kind of counter-Providence, if we may use the word. So strange are the vagaries of human nature, that Frederick felt a sort of pious thankfulness steal over him when he saw before him this opportunity for a break-out which would be unsuspected by his friends. This time it would require no scheming, no fictitious invitation; which was one of the reasons why he went off with such exhilarated feelings. He bore the Channel far better than Dick could have believed, being supported by his pleasurable anticipations, and arrived in Paris in a delightful turmoil of expectation. He was free! He could do what he liked—go where he liked! He had some money of his own in his pocket, and the letter of credit his mother had given him. Plenty of money, no restraint, and in Paris! He settled himself in an hotel not too much frequented by English, and made up his mind really to enjoy himself, and take the good of his opportunities, for a week at least.

He went into it with a plunge, just as his less elevated contemporary would go "on the spree." But, fortunately or unfortunately, there is no concealment about the latter process. It is received as a kind of painful necessity by the poor women who suffer most by it; and the record does not put the culprit at any great moral disadvantage. It is otherwise in the higher classes. Frederick went everywhere where he ought not to go; did everything that was most unbecoming and inappropriate. He did not get intoxicated, but he drank a great deal of champagne, and kept himself in a state of reckless excitement from day to day; and he got into the very cream of bad company—the company of people who shocked all his prejudices and revolted his good taste, but yet swept him along on that wild tide of pleasure, which was what he wanted. He had got a fortnight's leave, to accomplish the journey to Pisa and back, to console his little cousin, and win her confidence, and bring her kindly home. It was, however, ten days after he had left London when he woke up from his wild dream in Paris, his money all but exhausted, his frame worn out, his faculty of enjoyment at an end. That was not a pleasant waking, as may be readily supposed. He came to himself among the husks of his pleasures, and cursed them, and repented. He had done it a great many times before.

This time, however, there were unfortunate complications. He had still a long journey to make, and no time to do it in; and he had heavy expenses of travelling still to encounter, and no money to pay them. What was he to do? Cursing those husks of pleasure is one thing, and re-making them into the gold they represent is quite another. He did not dare to write to his mother, and show her that *he was still in Paris*. He would rather die, he thought,

than compromise the position which was every thing to him, or betray the secret of his life. Yet he must go on somehow, and accomplish his mission. With a racking headache and a despairing heart he began to count up his remaining coins, and calculate the time necessary for his journey. Time and money alike would just suffice to take him to Pisa. He had but realized this fact, without drawing any conclusion from it, when some one knocked at his door. He was in a second-rate hotel, but occupied its best room—a chamber all gorgeous with mirrors and marble tables and bronze candelabra. He hurriedly drew the curtains of the alcove which held his bed, and in a querulous tone bade his visitor enter. To his disgust and confusion he saw, when the door opened, the only Englishman whom he had encountered—a middle-aged man, in sporting costume and with boisterous manners, who had joined Frederick's party (always against his will) on various occasions, and now came forward with horrible cordiality, holding out a red, fat hand, which seemed to the unfortunate prodigal the greasiest and dirtiest that he had ever shaken. He touched this paw reluctantly, with a repugnance in which some alarm and a sense of the necessity of giving nobody offence was mingled. He did not know who the man was. Had he been in other circumstances he would have repudiated his acquaintance haughtily; but at present he had the painful consciousness upon him that he was in everybody's power.

"Well, sir, how are you after last night?" said his visitor. "Hope you find yourself tolerably well after that *p'tey soupey?* It's played the very deuce with me, though I ought to be seasoned. You young ones have all the odds in your favour. Thought you'd feel yourself pulled up hard this morning, after the champagne—and the bill. Ha, ha! the bill; that's the worst fun of it all; barring that, sir, this sort of life would be too pleasant to be true. The bill keeps us in mind that we're mortal, hey?"

"I don't feel myself in any danger of forgetting that fact," said Frederick stiffly.

He intended to answer with dignity and distance, but his mingled dislike to and fear of his visitor introduced a complaining, querulous tone into his voice. He seemed, even to himself, to be whimpering over a hard fate, instead of uttering a mere morality with the loftiness of a superior. And somehow, as he spoke, he looked at the table, where "Bradshaw" lay spread out beside the unhappy remains of his money, the few miserable gold pieces which he had left. The man gave a suppressed whistle at this sight.

"So bad as that?" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Mr. Eastwood, I've been keeping my eye upon you. I mean well, if I'm a little rough; and if you won't ask me to sit down, I'll take it upon myself to do so, if you'll excuse me; for I haven't yet got over *the effects of* last night. I know your name?—yes, sir. It's a good *name, and I* take an interest in all that bear it. Related to Sir

Geoffrey, I don't doubt, Mr. Frederick Eastwood? There's how I know, sir. Picked it up the other night, after you'd been dining; and, if you'll believe me, I've taken an interest in you ever since."

"You are very good, I am sure—though you have so much the advantage of me," said Frederick, more stiff than ever, yet afraid to show his resentment; for the fellow, as he called him in his heart, held out in his fat hand a card, bearing his respectable name at full, with the most immaculate of addresses—that of the Junior Minerva Club. Even his home address would have been less terrible. There are dozens of "Elms" about London, but only one Junior Minerva. He looked at the card with a dismay which he could not conceal. He stood upright by his chair, not following the example of his visitor. He would have liked to kick him down stairs, or to thrust him out of the window; but he dared not do it. It seemed to his feverish eyes that this man held his reputation, his character, everything that he cared for in the world within his greasy hands.

"I'm naturally interested," his visitor went on, "for I was born and bred up on the Eastwood estates, near to Sterborne, if you know it. Very glad to see you, sir, when you come in my direction. To be sure I have the advantage of you. My name is Batty—Charles Batty—at your service. I drive a good trade in the way of horses by times, though I call myself an auctioneer, and don't refuse no jobs as will pay. Bless you, I'd buy libraries as soon as yearlings, and get my profit out of them, though it's slower. Mr. Eastwood, sir, knowing the respectable family you come from and all your excellent connexions, and your address at your club, &c., &c., I should not say, sir, but what I might also be of use to you."

Misery, we are told, makes us acquainted with strange bedfellows. So does that modern form of misery called impecuniosity, which has its agonies more sharp than any primitive form of privation or pain. It is one of the worst penalties of the want of money, that the subject of that fatal want feels such eagerness to anticipate help that he is ready to look for it in the most unlikely places, and in his extremity will stretch his hand out in the dark to meet anybody's grasp. This rash eagerness of desperation specially belongs to the exhausted state of mind and purse in which Frederick now found himself. He was past all calculation of probabilities, ready to seize upon any shadow of aid, however attained. Insensibly he slid into his chair, and a faint gleam of hope and light seemed to diffuse itself in the dull air around him. He took a rapid survey of the situation. His repugnance for the man who sat opposite to him, watching his movements, was not in any degree lessened; but he reflected that anyhow he had betrayed himself to this man. Stranger and *vaurien* though he seemed, he held the character of the accomplished Frederick Eastwood in his hands; and every

principle of self-preservation, and of that respect for the world's opinion which was his curse and his punishment, moved him to try what means he could of bringing some advantage out of this now inevitable evil. He seated himself with a sigh of impatience and wretchedness, sheathing his sword, so to speak.

"The truth is, I am in a scrape, and I don't see my way out of it," he said.

"Tell me all about it, Mr. Eastwood; I'll find a way out of it," said Batty, rubbing his greasy hands.

I suppose they were greasy hands. At all events, it was this particular which dwelt on Frederick's memory and revolted his fine feelings. Ugh! the thought made him sick years after. In the meantime, however, he had no time to be nice.

"The fact is," he said, with hesitation, "that I was on my way to Italy on business"—— Here he paused, remembering what Batty had said of an interest in the Eastwoods. "On family business. I had something to do—of importance; and I have been —detained here."

This euphemism delighted his companion. He gave a horse-laugh, which affected Frederick's nerves. "Yes; you have been—detained here: I understand. By Jove, you *are* fun," said this appreciative listener.

Frederick took no notice of the vulgar outburst. Now that he had business in hand he could be clear enough. He laid bare his necessities to this strange and novel adviser. There is no telling —as men in Frederick Eastwood's condition easily find out—in what strange regions money, and the inclination to lend it, may be found. Nothing could be less promising than this coarse Englishman, who had thrust himself into the young man's path so much against his will; and yet in this unlikely quarter salvation was to be found. We need not concern ourselves here about Mr. Batty's motives.

"I thought you looked too much a swell to be a commercial gent, sir," he exclaimed later; "but when I picked up that card you might have knocked me down with a feather. Eastwoods has always been the height of quality in my eyes. I have been born and bred on their lands; and as for good-will to serve 'em—here's a way to prove it."

Frederick was no neophyte, to put the unbounded confidence of a boy in these fine speeches; but he knew that there are a great many kinds of money-lenders, and that there are people in the world who are to be influenced, even to the supreme length of opening their purses, by a good name and a well-known address. Besides, after all there was no great risk attendant upon Batty's generosity. A man in a public office—a man with a character—is not likely to allow himself to be ruined for a matter of fifty pounds, *especially* when he has a mother full of innocent credulity to fall

back upon. Thus the bargain was made, which was to Frederick, as soon as it became certain, an insignificant transaction. The moment he had signed the note and got the money. his despair of an hour ago seemed incredible to him, and all his objections to Batty recurred in double force.

"If you are ever down my way, I'll hope you'll eat a bit of mutton with me," said the hospitable usurer: "not *salmis* and *vol-à-vent*, Mr. Eastwood, for we ain't up to that; but sound English mutton, with a glass of good wine to wash it down. And I'll show you a stable that will make your mouth water."

Frederick, who had become stiff again, bowed and thanked him from a mountain-top of superiority—and it was Batty's hope to spend another evening in his society which determined him on the virtuous step of quitting Paris that night.

What was his brain busy about as he rolled out of the wicked, seductive city, where all vice betakes itself with the hope of being tempted, in that chill spring evening, between the lamps and the stars? His head was confused with all he had passed through. The fumes of his "pleasures" were still in it, mingled with the disgust which is inevitable, but which floats away still more quickly than the fumes of the "pleasures." The thrill of his hairbreadth escape was also vibrating through him; but a man of Frederick Eastwood's habits soon gets used to that thrill of escape. He was concocting and putting in order a reasonable way of accounting for his acquaintance with such a man as Batty, should it ever become known to his friends. All at once, while he was arranging his bargain with Batty, this had flashed upon his mind. He would not conceal that, having a day or two to pass in Paris, he had determined on going to a purely French hotel, to escape the mass of travelling English who fill up every corner; with the view of seeing Frenchmen as they are, he had gone to this obscure hostelrie; and there, by an odd chance, he had found this rough Englishman stranded, not knowing the language—thrown, as it were, upon his charity. "A scamp, of course, and thoroughly objectionable; but what could one do?" Frederick said to himself, as he made up his story. His story seemed to himself so satisfactory that it really accounted for the acquaintance, even to his own mind. He recalled to recollection that he had been obliged to interpret for his unpleasant compatriot, and the fiction gradually consolidated into fact. He believed it himself long before he had reached the Marseilles steamboat which was the next step in his hurried way.

CHAPTER VI.

PISA.

FREDERICK had left Paris between the lamps and the stars, as I have said, on a chilly night, when the darkness and confusion in his own mind agreed better with the mist and rolling steam that made a cloud about the train as it dashed into the darkness, than with the serene celestial lights which tried in vain to penetrate that veil of vapour. He came into the harbour at Leghorn again between stars and lamps, but this time in the blue-green dawn of an Italian spring morning, too early for any stir except that which attended the arrival of the steamer. Do people still have that long *promenade sur l'eau* through the green sea basin from point to point before they are allowed to land, and be subjected to the final examination at the Dogana? I suppose all that has been changed with so many other things, with the abolition of passports, and other hindrances to the traveller. Frederick Eastwood did not now feel so hurried as when he was in Paris. He had arranged how he was to write home, and to telegraph to the office, begging for the extra week's leave which was inevitable. He wrote his mother a long letter, telling her how he had been seized with "unpleasant symptoms" in Paris, but would not send her word of it lest he should alarm her; how he had managed to come on to Leghorn, taking the journey easily, and really had not suffered as he feared he would; how, on the whole, he was much better; how he intended to proceed to Pisa in the evening after a rest; and how within a week they might expect to see him back with his cousin. "Don't be uneasy about me," he said, "I am really a great deal better. I feel sure I shall now get home quite comfortably; but, as you remarked before I left, I was not well when I started—too much confinement, I suppose"——I don't attempt to explain this other fiction which he put forth with perfect gravity, and without much feeling of guiltiness. "Unpleasant symptoms" might mean anything, and I fear that from schoolboy days the excuses given at home are not judged by a very high standard of truthfulness. Frederick's conscience did not trouble him much on this subject. He telegraphed to his chief at the office, announcing his detention by illness, without entering into any particulars as to where that illness had occurred, and claiming so many days' extension of leave as would re-establish his health for the journey home. He felt ill enough, it must be allowed, after all he had gone through—ill enough almost to feel justified in the report he gave of his ailing condition—"seedy," as he would have called it, to the last degree. He could not eat anything, he slept badly, his lips were parched, his hand hot and tremulous, and his looks bore him unim*peachable testimony,* better than a medical certificate. Yet he felt

rather happy in his unhappiness, as he rested and tried to eat a little *minestra* at the hotel at Leghorn. It was not so good as the *bouillon* he would have got in Paris, or the beef-tea at home, but it was all he was capable of. In the evening he proceeded on his short railway journey to Pisa—and on the way his mind, if not his body, mended rapidly. It was again dark when he arrived. He went to one of the hotels on the Lung' Arno, and took a feeble walk in the evening to see the place, though so little could be seen. He had never been in Italy before, and though the circumstances were such as to damp enthusiasm, there was in Frederick's mind a certain new-born freshness of a man returned to the paths of duty which we can compare to nothing but the feelings of one recovering from an illness. It was over; he felt languid, weak, but good. He had turned his back alike on temptation and upon sin. He was convalescent. Now there is no real moral excellence in being convalescent even after a fever; but that sufferer must have had unkindly tending and little love about him in his malady, who does not feel that it is good of him to get better, and that he has done something for which all his friends are justly grateful to him. Frederick, though he had no friends to be grateful, felt precisely in this condition. He felt *good.* In Paris he had felt miserable, mournful, and what he called penitent—that is he had felt that pleasure carried too far ends by becoming unpleasant, and that it costs very dear, and that the amount of satisfaction to be got out of it is scarcely proportioned to the outlay. This mood had lasted during the greater part of his journey. But after a man has so accounted for his misfortunes as Frederick had done, and has got the means of beginning again, and feels himself clear of the toils for the time being, such a mood does not last very long; and by the time he reached Pisa he had got fully into the convalescent state, and felt good. While his dinner was preparing he took a walk down by the side of Arno, in which once more the stars above and the lamps below were reflecting themselves with serene composure, the lights of heaven asserting no proud superiority over the lights of earth; and then turned aside to that wonderful group of buildings of which everybody has heard. Nothing in all Italy belongs to our childhood like that leaning tower. Frederick looked up at it, bending towards him through the darkness, and recollected pictures in books at home which his mother had shown him of evenings when he stood by her knee in pinafores, before "life" began. His reminiscences gave the softest domestic turn to his mind, and made him feel still more good than before. Even in the dark there were still some beggars about, flitting out of corners at the sight of the stranger, and he emptied his pocket among them, giving them francs and half francs with a wild liberality which increased tenfold the numbers of these waiters upon Providence next evening in the Piazza del Duomo. There were fitful gleams of moonlight coming now and then from out a mass of clouds, and sending broad beams of

momentary glory behind and between the different buildings. Frederick was awed and impressed, as well as touched and softened. This was like the higher light of religious feeling coming in to elevate the domestic piety to which his heart had been suddenly opened by recollection. Thus impressed and ameliorated the convalescent walked back to his hotel to dinner, and was able to eat something, the reader will be glad to hear.

It was late, and he did not feel disposed to break the almost holy calm of his feelings after so many agitations, by making any effort to see his cousin that evening. He looked up at the tall houses as he went along, wondering if perhaps one of the faint lights he saw might be hers, but he was content to remain in this state of doubt till next day. One night could make little difference. When he had finished the meal, which was slight, but more satisfactory than anything he had been able to have since he left Paris, he made inquiries of the genial Italian waiter as to the position of the Palazzo Scaramucci, and whether anything was known of its English inhabitants. Antonio indicated to him exactly where the house was, and was eager to add that he knew the servant of the English gentleman who had died there. "Figure to yourself," he said, "that Mademoiselle, his daughter, is all alone in that house of the dead." The conversation was carried on in French, and Antonio was eloquent. He gave the stranger instantly a sketch of the girl thus left without any one to take care of her. "Letters have come from the friends in England, but no one has arrived," said Antonio. "What kind of hearts can they have, blessed Madonna! Niccolo does not know what will become of the poor young lady. The Forestieri here are kind to her, but what is that when she is left all alone by her friends? Monsieur perhaps may know some of her friends? She is a beautiful young lady, but strange, neither like the English Meeses, nor the Italian Signorine, and Niccolo says——"

"Did you say she was beautiful?" said Frederick. This was a particular which it was impossible to hear without a certain interest.

"She will be beautiful when she is older, when she has more *embonpoint*," said Antonio. "But she is not English in her beauty, nor in anything else. Niccolo says she will sit for days together and never speak. She had a very strange father. He is buried in the English cemetery, so I believe all must be right. But in my opinion, though Monsieur may think it droll, the old Englishman was *tant soit peu sorcier!*"

"*Sorcier?*" said Frederick, with a languid smile.

"Of course Monsieur thinks it droll—but for my part I believe he has thrown a spell over Mademoiselle. No one can melt her. She sheds no tear, Niccolo says. She listens to the English ladies *without replying* a word. The only Christian thing about her is

that she goes often to St. Maria della Spina, the little, little, very little church which Monsieur may have remarked; and as she is Protestant, I suppose that must be a sin. Perhaps, if Monsieur knows any of the English in Pisa, he will be able to see this strange and beautiful young girl"——

"Perhaps," said Frederick, taking the key of his bedroom and the candle from Antonio's hand. He did not choose to say that he was the lingering messenger whom her friends had sent for Innocent. But his mind was compassionately moved towards her. Beauty is always a point in everybody's favour, and the sense of power and protection in himself was pleasant to him. It quite completed, if anything had been wanted to do so, the rehabilitation of Frederick Eastwood in Frederick Eastwood's own eyes. What a change his appearance would make in the position of this deserted young creature, whose melancholy soul no doubt only wanted the touch of his kindness and compassion to rouse it into warmer life! "Poor child," he said to himself almost tenderly, as he went to bed. He would be a brother to her, and to do them justice at home, they would be good to the poor girl. Yet somehow he could not but feel that his own influence, as the first to go to her, would do most for Innocent. The thought diffused a pleasant warmth and revival about his heart.

Pisa is not a cheerful place. It has neither the beauty of situation, nor the brightness of aspect, nor even the larger historical interest which belongs to Florence, its near neighbour and whilom rival. It has fallen out of the race as a town may do as well as an individual. But, on the other hand, it has no keen ice-wind to sweep its streets like those that chill the very blood in your veins in the deep ravines cut through lofty blocks of houses which form the Florentine streets. The equable temperature of Pisa hangs about it like a cloud, stilling the life in it that it may never grow loud enough to disturb the invalids who set up their tents in those old palaces. They have a little society among themselves, gentle, monotonous, and dull, such as befits invalids. A great many English people are in that subdued winter population, people who are, or are supposed to be, *poitrinaires*, and people in attendance upon these sufferers, and finally, people who go because other people go, without either knowing or caring about the special advantages of the place. An English doctor and his wife, and an English clergyman and his wife, are generally to be found in all such places, and most usually these excellent persons do all they can to reduce the little colony of English, living in the midst of the quaint old foreign town, into the aspect of a village or small country place in England, where everybody talks of everybody, and knows his or her domestic grievances by heart. Mr. Vane, when he came to Pisa to die, had sought the assistance of the doctor, but not of the clergyman; so it was Mrs. Drainham, and not Mrs. St.

John, who had taken Innocent in hand when her father died, and had tried to make something of the forlorn girl. Though Frederick of course knew nothing about this, two letters had been despatched but a few days before to Mrs. Eastwood and another relation, adjuring them to come to the help of the young stranger. The doctor had himself written in a business like way to Sir Edmund Vane, but Mrs. Drainham had taken Mrs. Eastwood in hand, and had written her what both herself and the doctor felt to be a very touching letter. The author of this affecting composition had been reading it over to some select friends on the very evening on which Frederick arrived in Pisa. Dr. and Mrs. Drainham lived on the first floor of the Casa Piccolomini, on the sunny side of the Arno, in a very imposing apartment, where they often assembled round them a little society "in a very quiet way," for the doctor himself was something of an invalid, and practised in Pisa as much for his own health as for that of his patients. They were people who were generally understood to be well off, an opinion which it is good for everybody, and especially for professional people, to cultivate about themselves. Every Wednesday and Saturday, tea and thin bread and butter, cut exactly as bread and butter is in England, were to be had from eight till eleven in the Drainhams' handsome drawing-room. On the evening in question the English colony at Pisa was very well represented in this modest assembly. There was Mr. and Mrs. St. John, accompanied by a gentle young English curate with pulmonary symptoms, who was staying with them, and giving the benefit of his services when he felt able for it. There was old Mr. Worsley and his pretty daughters, one of whom was suffering from bronchitis, and the other from *ennui*, the latter the more deadly malady of the two. The healthy portion of the population was rather in the background, and not held in much estimation. Mr. St. John himself, who now weighed nearly sixteen stone, had come to Pisa also with pulmonary symptoms, and was fond of citing himself as an instance of the cures effected by its wonderful equability of temperature. "But a winter in England would kill me still. I could never survive a winter in England," he would say, tapping his ample bosom with his hand, and coughing to show that he had not quite lost the habit. On this particular occasion he uttered these words, which were very frequent on his lips, in order to console and encourage poor little Mrs. O'Carroll, the wife of a gigantic Irishman, who had broken all his bones one after another in riding across country, and who stood gaunt and tall in a corner conversing with the doctor, with red spots upon his high cheekbones, and a hollow circle round his big eyes, which did not promise such a comfortable termination.

"Oh, then, and you'll tell Harry," said the anxious woman, with the mellow tones of her country. "You'll tell him all about it, Mr. *Singin, dear,* and what you took, and how you lived?"

"There is nothing to tell, my dear lady," said the clergyman. 'Pisa air, and a regular life, and taking care never to be out late or early, and nourishing food as much as I could take. But the air is the great thing. There is a serenity and equability in this Italian climate.

"Ah, then!" cried poor Mrs. O'Carroll, "to get him to take care is all the battle. He never was ill in his life, and he won't allow he's ill, not if I were to preach to him night and day."

The only persons present who had no uncomfortable symptoms were two ladies who sometimes dominated the party, and sometimes were snubbed and cast into the shade, according to the influence which prevailed. These were the two Miss Boldings, ladies in the earlier half of middle-age, one of whom studied Art, while the other studied Italy; women of perfect independence, and perfect robustness, who when Mr. St. John was not there, carried matters with a high hand, and dismissed the question of health as unworthy to occupy the first place in the conversation. "You think a great deal too much about your lungs," Miss Bolding would say. "Let them alone, and they will come all right. Don't fuss about your health. Pisa is no better than any other place, and no worse. Don't think about it. Occupy yourself with something. Neither I nor Maria ever take the smallest trouble about our healths, and what is the consequence? We have never ailed anything since we had the measles. Don't mind Mr. St. John, that's his hobby. If you'll meet me to-morrow morning in the Campo Santo—unless you are afraid——"

"Oh, no, not at all afraid," said the gentle curate, with a flush of youthful shyness and wounded pride. All these conversations were interrupted by Mrs. Drainham, who called at once to Miss Bolding for her advice, and to Mrs. O'Carroll for sympathy.

"I want you to tell me whether you think I have done right," she said, with much humility. "I am so anxious about poor Miss Vane. I have just written a letter to her aunt, though with much hesitation, for I have not your gift in writing, dear Mrs. St. John. Would you mind just listening to what I have said? If I had your approval I should feel encouraged after having sent it. It is very badly expressed, I am afraid, but it comes from the heart," said Mrs. Drainham, casting an appealing glance round her. She had pretty eyes, and was rather apt to give appealing glances. The audience gave a vague murmur of assent and applause, and Mr. St. John added, in a bold and round voice, his certainty of approval.

"It will be an excellent letter, that I don't doubt for a moment," said the clergyman; and on this encouragement Mrs. Drainham proceeded to read it, her husband standing behind her, feeling his own pulse, with a benevolent and complacent smile. And indeed the letter was more than excellent, it was eloquent. It appealed to

the feelings of the distant aunt in the most touching way. It bade her remember the sister with whom no doubt her own childhood had been passed, and oh! to extend her motherly protection over that dear sister's orphan child; and it brought forward many religious, as well as natural, arguments to soften the heart of poor Innocent's nearest relation. In short it was just such a letter as was calculated to bring tears into Mrs. St. John's eyes, and which drove Mrs. Eastwood half frantic with indignation when she read it. "Does this woman think I am an unnatural wretch, to want all this talking to?" poor Mrs. Eastwood asked, half crying with anger and wounded feeling. But the company in the Casa Piccolomini thought it a beautiful letter. They thought the relations must be hardened indeed if they could resist such an appeal as that.

"I am sure the aunt must be a dreadful woman," said Clara Worsley, "or she would have come by this time. Will you take me to see her to-morrow, dear Mrs. Drainham? After that letter everybody ought to take an interest in her——"

"You have expressed all our feelings, my dear," said Mrs. St. John, pressing the hand of the doctor's wife with mingled admiration and envy. "I doubt very much if I could have done it half as well."

"Oh, that from you!" said Mrs. Drainham, with enthusiasm, for Mrs. St. John was literary, and the highest authority on matters of style.

"But I hear the girl is a very odd girl," said Miss Bolding. "Doctor, what did her father die of? Are they wrong in their heads? I knew a Vane once, of a West Country family, who were all very queer. I wonder if they were the same Vanes? Devonshire, I think, or Somersetshire, I am not sure which"——

"They are a Devonshire family," said Dr. Drainham. "And there is nothing wrong about their brains. He died of general break-up, Miss Bolding, a high-tempered man who had lived hard. I have met him about Italy in all sorts of places. The poor girl has been oddly brought up, that is all."

"I fear without any sort of religious training, which accounts for a great deal," said Mr. St. John.

"Not without some sort of religion," said Miss Maria Bolding. "She is constantly coming over to the little Church of the Spina, the toy church, as my sister calls it. A perfect little gem; I prefer it myself to the Duomo. The girl has good taste, and she is wonderfully pretty. Not the Raphael style perhaps, but just such a face as Leonardo would have given anything for. I called her the Leonardo before I knew who she was."

"Don't you think, my dear, you take rather a superficial view of *the matter?*" said Mrs. St. John. "Think what a terrible thing to

be said of an English girl—that all she knows of religion is to be constantly in the Church of the Spina! It is bad enough for the poor Italians who know no better——"

"You must go and see her, Martha," said Mr. St. John, coughing. "I have had a delicacy about it, as her poor father declined to see me. Yes, he declined to see me, poor man," he added, shaking his head mournfully, with a sigh. "I don't like to mention it, but such was the case. I fear he was sadly deficient, sadly deficient——"

"If he is the Vane I suppose him to be," said Mr. Worsley, in a hoarse voice, "he was as great a scamp as I ever met in my life. A man you saw everywhere—well connected, and all that. A fellow that played high, and ruined every man that had anything to do with him. And died poor, of course; all those scapegraces do," said the comfortable invalid, putting his hand instinctively into his pocket.

"But his poor child. Whatever he was, we must not let that detract from our interest in the poor girl," said Mrs. Drainham. "I have tried hard to get her to talk to me, to open her heart and to have confidence in me as a true friend. You would think she did not understand the meaning of the words."

"Have you heard that poor Lady Florence Stockport has arrived, with that delicate boy of hers?" said Mrs. St. John: and then Miss Worsley began to consult with Mrs. Drainham about the music at church, and whether Miss Metcalfe, who played the harmonium, could not be induced to give up in favour of young Mr. Blackburn, who had taken a musical degree at Oxford, and written a cantata, and meant to spend the spring months in Pisa.

"It would make such a difference to our little service," said Miss Worsley; "and don't you think, with all the attractions of the Roman Catholic ritual around us, we ought to do everything we can to improve our services?"

Thus the general tide of the conversation flowed on, and Innocent was remitted back into obscurity.

All this took place on the evening when Frederick Eastwood arrived in Pisa. From his chamber, where he was already asleep, and from the windows of the Casa Piccolomini, might have been seen the faint light in the third-floor windows which marked where the lonely girl was sitting. She was all by herself, and she did not know, as Mrs. Drainham said, what the meaning of the word friend was. But I must turn this page and make a new beginning before I can tell you what manner of lonely soul this poor Innocent was.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PALAZZO SCARAMUCCI.

A LONG, bare room, the walls painted in distemper, with a running border of leaves and flowers, and the same design running across the rafters overhead; three huge windows, with small panes, draped with old brocaded hangings round the top, but without either blinds or curtains to shut out the cloudy glimpses of the sky; very sparely furnished; some old cabinets and rococo tables by the walls, some old settees and chairs, which had once been handsome; the floor tiled with red triangular tiles, with pieces of carpet before the sofas. At one end a stove, which opened to show the little fire, erected upon a stone slab like a door-step, and with an ugly piece of black tube going almost horizontally into the wall, had been added for the advantage of the English Forestieri, who insisted—benighted northern people—upon such accessories of what they called comfort. Another old rug, faded out of its natural brightness into sweet secondary tints of colour, had been laid before this impromptu fireplace; but the aspect of the place was cold, chilling the spectator to the bone. One or two dark portraits, painted on panels, hung on the walls; they were very grim and very old; for this was the *terzo piano*, let at a cheap rate, and with few elegancies to boast of. Near the stove, on a little marble-topped table, stood the tall lamp, with its two unshaded wicks blazing somewhat wildly, for it had not been trimmed for some time. The oil in it, however, one good, cheap luxury, which even the poor may have in Italy, was so sweet and pure that the air was quite untainted. On a little tray was a long loaf of the brown, very dry bread of the country, a plate of green salad, and a thin flask of common red wine—a pretty supper to look at, but scarcely appetizing fare for a delicate appetite. At the first glance there seemed to be no one in the room to benefit by these preparations, but after a while you could perceive in the recess of one of the windows a shadowy figure, leaning up in a corner, with its head against the pane, looking out. All that could be seem from that window was the cloudy sky, and some occasional gleams of moonlight, which threw silver lines upon the dark floor, and—when you looked down, as into a well—the Arno, flowing far below, with the stars, and clouds, and fitful moon, all reflected in it; and on its very edge the little Church of St. Maria della Spina, with all its tiny pinnacles tipped with silver. She who looked out from this high window could not be looking for any one; the people below were as specks hurrying along in the cold, with cloaks twisted over their shoulders. The watcher was nearer the heavens than the earth. She stood there so long, and was so motionless, that gradually the *blazing* light, blown about softly by some draught from door or

window, the little table with the salad and the wine-flask became the centre of the still life, and the human shadow in the window counted for nothing. No breath or sound betrayed that something was there more alive than the light of the lamp or the glimmer of the wood embers, which, indeed, fell now and then in white ashes, and broke the utter silence of the place.

This silence, however, was much more effectually broken by the entrance of a stout, middle-aged Italian, with a cloak over one of his shoulders, and the *cache-nez* in his hand in which he was about to muffle his features when he went out. He looked round and round the large room, apparently unable to see the figure in the window, and then, with an impatient exclamation, went to the table and snuffed the blazing wicks and trimmed the lamp. "Just like her, just like her," he said to himself, "gazing somewhere; never eating, never considering that one must live. If I were to add a slice of salami—though the child is fastidious, she does not eat salami ——"

"I am here, Niccolo," said a voice from the window.

"So I supposed, signorina; I knew you must be in some corner. May I be permitted to remark that life is not supported by the eyes, but by the mouth? If you will not eat the *cena* I have prepared for you, what can I do? I cannot take you on my knees and feed you like a baby. Oh, I have done it; I have been obliged to do it, when I had the poor padrone's authority to sustain me, before now."

"Niccolo," said the voice, "I shall not want anything more to-night. If you are ready you may go."

"Oh yes, I may go," said Niccolo fretfully, "not knowing whether I may not find you a little heap of cinders in the morning, or fallen down in the window and frozen to death, Madonna Santissima! without the power to raise yourself up. If you would but have Philomena to stay with you, at least, in case you should want anything."

"I want nothing," said the girl. She came out of the window, advancing a few steps, but still keeping quite out of the cheerful circle of the light.

"No, the signorina wants nothing; the signorina will soon not want anything but a hole in the heretic cemetery beside her father; and when one goes sinfully out of the world by one's own wickedness, besides being a Protestant and believing nothing, what can one look for? If I were the signorina, I should take very good care as long as I could not to die, and put myself in the power of those beings with the prongs that you see in the Campo Santo. I should take very great trouble, for my part, not to die."

Upon this she came out altogether out of the darkness, and approached the fire. "Do you think that not eating kills people?"

she asked. "I cannot eat, I have no appetite, but I do not wish to die."

"At least, under any circumstances, one can drink a little wine," said Niccolo, with disapproving dignity; "no effort is necessary to swallow a little wine. Signorina, I have put everything in order. I will leave the key with Luigi down-stairs, that the Philomena may enter in the morning without disturbing you. I now wait only to bid you a *felicissimina notte*. *Buona notte*, my little mistress—sleep well; and the Madonna and the saints take care of you, poor child!"

This little outburst was not unusual. The girl extended her hand to him with a smile, and Niccolo kissed it. Then throwing his cloak over his other shoulder, and wrapping it round him, he left her in her solitude. The guests at the Casa Piccolomini were dispersing at the same time, escorting each other, and escorted by their servants through the still streets. As Niccolo closed the great door after him, the sound seemed to reverberate through the blackness of the great staircase, down which he plunged, darkling, groping his way by the walls. Mr. Worsley, who lived on the first floor, had a coil of green wax-taper in his pocket, which he lighted to guide himself and his daughter to the door. They were a little afraid when they heard the footsteps stumbling down, not having been able to divest themselves of the idea that stiletto-thrusts were the natural accompaniments of a dark staircase. And with his cloak doubled over his left shoulder, and his red *cache-nez* hiding his countenance, Niccolo looked dangerous, more like killing his man in a corner than watching with the tenderness of a woman over the wayward child whom he had just left with an ache in his honest heart.

All alone in the house! The *appartamento* was not so large as that of Mr. Worsley down-stairs, for it was divided into two, as being adapted for cheaper lodgers. Besides this large *salone*, however, there was an ante-chamber, of which while Mr. Vane was alive he made a dining-room; and then a long stone passage, echoing and dreary, through which the solitary girl had to pass to her bed-room, another terrible stone room, floored with tiles, at the other end of the house. She had to pass her father's room by the way, and another gaping empty chamber, full of the furniture which, with Italian superstition, had been turned out of the chamber of death. She was not afraid. She had been used to such constant solitude that it seemed natural to her. While her father was alive she had been as solitary as she was now, and it did not seem to her, as it did to everybody else, that his mere presence in the house made so much difference. She had been brought up in a Spartan-Italian fashion, to bear the cold and heat as things inevitable. She put her feet upon the stone slab, which did duty as a hearth, more from custom than for the warmth, which she scarcely thought of. A small scaldino stood under the table, full of fresh embers, which *Niccolo had* brought with him from the kitchen; but though she

was cold she did not take it up and warm her hands over it, as a thorough Italian would have done. She was half Italian only, and half English, rejecting many habits of both nations. She had a small cloak of faded velvet drawn round her shoulders, old and cut after no fashion that had prevailed within the memory of man. It had come, I believe, originally from a painter's studio, but it was warm and kept her alive in the penetrating cold. Kind Mrs. Eastwood, in her luxurious chamber, was wondering at that moment how the poor child would brave an English winter, and if "the little room" would be warm enough, with its soft carpets and close-drawn curtains, and cheery fire. If she could have seen the Italian girl with her old mantle on her shoulders, and the scaldino at the foot of her chair!

I am afraid I am describing too much, which is a fatal weakness for a historian to fall into; but yet, of course, the gentle reader who does not scorn that delightful title would prefer to hear what this solitary girl was like. She had a straight, slim figure, too slim for beauty, though that defect of youth is one which it is easy to forgive. Her hair was dark and soft, and hung about her face, framing it with a soft fold, very slightly undulating at the ends, though not in anything that could be called a curl. I must warn my dear friend and gentlest auditor, that this sounds a great deal better in words, and looks a great deal better in a picture, than it does in reality; for a girl of sixteen with hair thus hanging about her, neither curled nor dressed, is apt to be an objectionable young person, inclining to untidiness, and to look like a colt, unkempt and untrimmed. But Innocent was a neglected girl, who had never known any better. She did not strike you at the first glance as beautiful. She had no colour, and even had been called sallow by some observers. The chief beauty that struck the beholder was the perfect shape of her face, a pure oval, with the chin somewhat accentuated, as in the pictures of Leonardo da Vinci, and the eyes somewhat long in shape. Miss Bolding was right when she called the girl a Leonardo. She wanted the crisped hair, and that subtle, sidelong sweetness in the eyes, which is so characteristic of that great master; but otherwise the character of her face was the same —somewhat long, and with all the softness of youth in the prolonged and perfect curve of the colourless cheek. The eyes were heavy-lidded; they were not "well-opened eyes." Only in moments of emotion did she raise the heavy lids freely, and flash the full light of her look upon you. At the present moment those lids were doubly heavy with dreams. The lips, which were thin and rather straight, without curves, were closed upon each other with the closeness of meditation; her hair fell into the hollow of her neck on either side, and lay in a half ring and careless twist upon her shoulder. A very simple back dress, without trimmings, appeared under the velvet cloak; these were the days before the Watteau

fashion became popular, when dresses were made with but one skirt, and long, sweeping over the wearer's feet. Such was her costume and her appearance. She took a little of the wine from the flask, and a morsel of the dry brown bread, and swallowed them as it seemed with great difficulty, bending over the fire in the stove, which began to sink into white ashes. Silence, cold, solitude, all around; and here in the empty house, in the empty world, this solitary creature, so young and forlorn. But she was not afraid. After a while she rose quite calmly, and lifted the long stalk of the lamp, and went away through the long echoing, ghostly passage. She saw nothing, feared nothing; her imagination was not at liberty, it was absorbed about other things.

Next morning it was more cheerful in the great *salone;* there was light, at least, which was much, and I think there was sunshine; but the gentle reader will forgive me if I confess that I have forgotten whether the Palazzo Scaramucci was on the sunny or the shady side. At all events, there was daylight, and a blue, clear, shining sky, and the sight of sunshine outside if not its actual presence. When Mrs. Drainham, who was really concerned about the girl, came to see her before twelve next morning, she found her seated by the same little table which had held her lamp on the previous night, with a little dish of polenta before her, and again the dry brown bread and the small flask of wine. It seemed the strangest, most distasteful breakfast to the Englishwoman. "Oh, my dear," she cried, "do send away that mess, and have a nice cup of tea. Wouldn't you enjoy a nice cup of tea? If you will come with me, my maid will make you one directly—and perhaps an egg and a little delicate bread and butter. I don't wonder that you have no appetite, my poor child."

"I like polenta," said Innocent, playing with her spoon, "and I don't like tea."

This seemed immoral to Mrs. Drainham. "If you go to England, my dear, you must not say you have been in the habit of having wine for breakfast," she said, "It would be thought so very strange for a young girl."

Innocent made no immediate answer. With a perverse impulse she poured out a little of the nostralé wine, the commonest and cheapest, and diluted it with water. I do not, I confess, think it was an attractive beverage. "Probably I shall never be in England," she said in a very low tone.

"Oh, you must go to England; that is one thing there can be no doubt of. What are you to do here, poor child? Friends have been raised up to you here, but it is not likely that people who are not connected with you would continue—and the apartment, you know," continued Mrs. Drainham, in her eagerness to prove what was self-apparent, "must be let. The marchese is very poor, and he could *not be expected to* lie out of his money, and Niccolo must find

another situation. Everything, in short, is at a standstill until you go away."

Something hot rushed to the girl's eyes—but if they were tears it was so unusual to shed them, that they rushed back again after an ineffectual effort to get forth. She made no answer. She had learned ere now, young as she was, the benefit of taking refuge in silence. Mrs. Drainham had drawn a chair near her, and sat looking at her, with eyes full of a curiosity not unmixed with disapproval. Mrs. Drainham, in short, disapproved of everything about her—her loose hair, her odd dress, her old velvet cloak, even the polenta on the tray before her, and the coloured water she was drinking. "What will they do with her in England?" she asked herself in dismay; but then *her* responsibility, at least, would be over, and her mind relieved.

"You have never been at school, my dear, I suppose?"

"No."

"Nor learned anything? But you must have had some resources; you must be able to do something? Needlework at least, or tapestry, or something to amuse yourself with? You must have been very lonely in your papa's time, as I hear he never saw any one. And you could not sit all the day with your hands before you; you must have been able to do something?" Mrs. Drainham cried, impressed almost against her will by the silence of her companion.

"I can read," said Innocent.

"And no more? I hope your aunt, Mrs. Eastwood, is well off. It would be dreadful indeed if your relations were not well off. Girls in your position frequently have to go out as governesses. I don't want to be unkind; but, my dear, it is for your advantage that you should look your circumstances in the face. Most girls of your age (you are past sixteen?) would have thought of that already. Suppose, for instance, that you were compelled to try and work for your own living. Now, what would you do?"

The suggestion was so strange that Innocent lifted her eyelids, and turned a wondering look upon her questioner; but apparently perceiving that nothing was to be made of it, cast them down again, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, and made no reply. "Why should I take the trouble to talk?" she seemed to say, which was not very civil to Mrs. Drainham, nor encouraging to that lady's benevolence, it must be allowed.

"You never thought of that view of the matter?" said the persevering woman. "But you ought to think of it. Few people, unless they are very rich, are disposed to take all the responsibility of a girl like you. They might help you, and be kind to you; but they would most likely think it was right and best that you should contribute at least to your own support."

"I do not know what you mean," said Innocent looking at her

with mingled wonder and resentment. She pushed away her little tray from her, and in sheer bewilderment took up the scaldino, putting it in her lap, and holding her hands over it. This was another thing upon which the doctor's wife, as she herself avowed, could not look with any toleration. She made a little gesture of distress, as if she would have put it away.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, my dear, don't let me see you with that odious thing on your knee! An English girl keeps her hands warm with doing something or other. You will find nothing of that sort in England. There your time will be all filled up in a rational way. There is always something going on, and you will find no time to nurse your hands in your lap. Of course, there is a great deal that will be very novel. Put down that scaldino, dear. I can't bear to see you with it. It is such an odd thing for an English girl to do."

"Am I an English girl?" said Innocent dreamily. She did not respond to what was said to her. "She never gives you a reasonable answer," Mrs. Drainham said afterwards, with an impatience for which it was not difficult to account.

It was just then that the tinkling bell at the door pealed, and Niccolo after some parley admitted a stranger. Niccolo recognized the name at once, though no English visitor could have recognized it had he heard it from Niccolo's lips. "Signor Estvode," he said, looking in at the door, and pausing, with the true instinct of an Italian servant, to watch the effect of the announcement. Innocent started to her feet, in her haste, dropping instinctively from her shoulders her old velvet mantle, and Mrs. Drainham sat and stared with genuine British composure, without any thought of politeness. Frederick came in, looking (as he was) something of an invalid still. He was pale; he had that look of convalescence we have already referred to on his interesting countenance. He came forward, holding out both his hands to the girl, who stood devouring him with her eyes, which for once were fully opened. She could not say anything; she could scarcely breathe. Many speculations had crossed her mind as to the kind of messenger who might arrive. This young man, looking not unlike one of the heroes of her dreams, pale, melancholy, yet smiling, holding out his hands to her, made such a sudden lodgment in the girl's inexperienced heart as I can neither define nor account for. The chances are that his mother, who was much kinder than Frederick, would have made no impression at all upon Innocent. She looked at him with her eyes all aglow and shining, with a sudden glad contraction and then expansion of her heart. She put down the scaldino, and went a step forward. "You are my little cousin," said Frederick, in a voice which the natural impulse of kindness and the pleasant sense of beneficence made melodious. He looked at her with no criticism in his eyes, rather with admiration and pleasure. The girl paused *all aglow,* on tiptoe, her sudden impulse betraying itself in every

line of her slim figure. Then she obeyed that impulse, poor, forlorn child. She threw herself forward, took the outstretched hands, and bent down and kissed them in her pretty Italian way. "Yes, I am Innocent," she said; "oh, take me away! take me away!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COUSINS.

THIS little scene was odd and somewhat embarrassing to a young Englishman utterly unaccustomed to have his hand kissed; but I think it highly probable that Frederick would have felt much less objection to it had it not been for the presence of that Gorgon of British propriety, which kept staring at him with an expression of shocked and suspicious watchfulness from the other side of the stove. He laughed with the embarrassment common to his nation under the circumstances. There is nothing so awkward, so unhappy, and unready, as an Englishman who is called upon to show any natural feeling of the softer kind before strangers. Why we all, and we alone, should feel that we are ridiculous when our hearts are touched, I cannot tell; but so it is. Frederick Eastwood was affected by the eager passion of his welcome; but with Mrs. Drainham's eyes upon him, he could do nothing but laugh. The primitive-minded girl, who was not aware of this tacit necessity, shrunk back into herself when, as she thought, he laughed at her. But the spectator felt that it was the right thing to do, and her disapproval softened. She indicated a chair to the new comer with a little wave of her hand.

"Dear child," she said in a caressing tone, "you must moderate your feelings. We all understand you; we all excuse you; but these are not English ways. Sit down a little, while I talk to you and to this gentleman. Mr. Eastwood, I think?—so far as one can understand an Italian's version of the name we were expecting to hear—"

"Yes," said Frederick, "I should have arrived a week ago, but for—indisposition. I am glad to find my cousin in such good hands."

Here they paused, and looked at each other, with sentiments which were not unfriendly, but a certain English community of feeling that made them sensible of the necessity of some sort of preliminary antagonism before the one agreed to accept the other as the person he claimed to be. Mrs. Drainham was a pretty woman, though it was appointed to her at this moment to act the Gorgon's *part.* And Frederick, with his peaked beard and melan-

choly eyes, was a handsome young man. The tone of the British matron perceptibly softened, as she took in at a glance the various evidences before her that the new comer was "a gentleman"—all-expressive and all-embracing phrase. She even laughed a little in her turn, and coloured very becomingly as she executed the sterner part of her duty.

"I am afraid you will think me impertinent," she said; "and I feel ridiculous; but as my husband and I have taken a great interest in Miss Vane, would you pardon me for asking if you have—any credentials—or authority? I am sure I beg your pardon. You will understand what I mean——"

Then they both laughed together, which advanced matters still farther.

"I have a letter from my mother to my cousin," he said. "I might have got a certificate of identity, had I thought she was so well guarded. And here is my card," he added, taking it out smilingly.

It was the card Batty had found in the Paris hotel, which was the first one that came to his hand. He knew it by a crease in the corner, and pushed it back again with a little shudder which he could not account for: for indeed the Batty episode had faded into unimportance already. The card, however, was given and accepted with a gracious smile and bow. That celestial address, the "Junior Minerva," impressed Mrs. Drainham, as it had impressed Frederick's less desirable acquaintance. A little conversation of the most amicable character ensued, winding up by an invitation to dinner for that evening.

"And you will come too, my dear," said the doctor's wife; "though it is a thing you could not do in ordinary circumstances. Nobody could reflect upon you for departing from the usual rules in your position. I will ask no one to meet you. Mr. Eastwood will bring you to us at seven o'clock."

Innocent had listened to this conversation vaguely, in a kind of stupor, feeling as if they spoke a language of which she had never before heard a word. Greek would have been as intelligible to her. It even hurt her vaguely that they seemed to understand each other in the language which she could not understand. She had been thrust back upon herself, which is always painful—thrust back after, as she thought, a gleam of new life and a new world, into the old dreary world, much drearier than ever by the contrast, though it was but momentary. The visionary intensity of a mind living in its own sensations almost annihilates space and time; and though it was but half an hour since Frederick Eastwood came upon the scene at all, there was room enough in that half hour to make the girl feel the force of two revolutions—the one from her dreary solitude into a new sphere of brightness, *tenderness,* companionship, which was as a revelation of heaven to *her; and the other, a* dreary circle back again, out of the light, out

of the society, out of the strange delightful newness which seemed to have changed her being all in a moment. The one was a sudden sun-rising, the other an equally sudden eclipse. She had been raised up to heaven and then suddenly tossed down again. The amount of emotion involved was quite excessive and extravagant, out of all keeping with the momentary character of the incidents; but Innocent was not aware of this, nor could have believed how utterly unimportant to the others was the half hour which subjected her to such vicissitudes of feeling as she had never before felt in her life. She made no reply to Mrs. Drainham's invitation, which, indeed, she scarcely comprehended. She did not understand the civilities with which her two companions parted, Frederick accompanying Mrs. Drainham to the door. What she imagined was that he had thus gone away without taking any further notice of her, and that all was over, and the new hope to which she seemed to have a right, taken from her. She sat in a stupor, watching them go away, fingering the folds of the old velvet cloak, which she had picked up mechanically from the floor, and feeling a mingled chill—of her shoulders from the want of her mantle, and of her heart from this strange desertion—which made her shiver all over, and gave her that nervous and passionate impulse to cry, which children and women are so seldom able to resist, but which poor Innocent had been victorious over often, tears being among the things which her father turned into highest ridicule. She had ceased almost to be able to weep—forgotten the way; the natural emotions had been frozen in their fountains. But the thrill of new existence of which she had been conscious had broken those frozen chains, and she began to struggle with a hysterical passion which roused all her pride and all her spirit to conquer it. No doubt, she thought, this new cousin, like her father, would despise the weakness which women indulged in. Innocent despised herself for being a woman, and she would have died sooner than yield to what she supposed to be a purely feminine impulse. She was struggling thus with herself, fighting the hardest battle she had fought since the time when goaded by his ridicule she had rushed upon her father like a little tiger, beating him with her baby fist, choking with suppressed passion, when the door opened again, and Frederick came in once more. She gazed at him with her breast heaving, and her eyes dilated, in the fierceness of her struggle to keep off the tears. And if he had laughed, or treated her emotion lightly, Innocent would have conquered. But Frederick's heart was really touched. He felt benevolent, paternal, full of patronage and kindness. He went up to her, and laid his hand caressingly on her head.

"My little cousin, we must make friends now that woman is gone," he said, smiling upon her.

Poor child, she knew nothing of self-control, scarcely anything of right and wrong. She threw out her arms and clung to him, in a

simple effort of nature to grasp at something; and fell into such a passion of sobs and cries on his bosom as frightened him. But yet what was more natural? She had just lost her father; she had no one in the world to turn to, except this new relation who belonged to her. She had been undergoing an unnatural repression, concealing her feelings in that stupor which grief so often brings. Frederick thought he understood it all, and it affected him, though he was glad there was no one else in the room. He put his arm round her, and even kissed the cheek which was partially visible, and said all the kind things he could think of. It lasted so long that, not being very strong himself, he began to totter a little under the unexpected burden, and would gladly have freed himself and sat down by her. But Innocent had been carried away by the tide, and could not stop herself. This was the beginning of their acquaintance. There were no preliminaries. She had never "given way" in her life before, except on the occasion we have already referred to—and heaven knows what strange processes were going on in the girl's half-developed, much-suppressed nature, as for the first time she gave her tears and emotion way.

When the hysterical sobbing came to an end, Innocent lifted her head from his breast, and looked at him, still holding him by the arms. She looked up suddenly, half beseeching him not to despise her, half daring him to do so; but there was no scorn in Frederick's eyes. He was very sorry for her

"My poor child!" he said, smoothing the ruffled hair upon her forehead.

Then a sudden flush came to her face, and light to her eyes. She released him as suddenly as she had clutched him. She sank back gently into her chair, with a shy, deprecating smile.

"I could not help it," she said, putting out her hand. She wanted to retain some hold of him, to be sure that he would not melt quite away like one of the dreams.

As for Frederick, though his first feeling, I confess, was great thankfulness at being permitted to sit down, he had no objection to have his hand held by those soft, long fingers, or to bear the eager look of eyes which shown upon him with a kind of worship. He told her how he had been coming to her for a long time, but had been detained—how he had come to take her home—how they must start next day, if possible, and travel as quickly as possible; and how his mother and sister were awaiting her anxiously, hoping to make her happy, and to comfort her in her trouble. Innocent leant back in her chair, and smiled and listened. She made no reply. It did not seem necessary to make any reply. She held his hand fast and let him talk to her, not caring much what he said. I don't know if her intelligence was much developed at this period of her life. She understood what he was saying, but it was as a song to *her, or a story that* he was telling. She did not mind how long she

listened, but it required no personal response—took no personal hold of her. The picture he made of The Elms, and his mother and sister, produced no sort of effect upon her mind. She was satisfied. Everything was unreal and vague except the one tangible fact, that he was sitting beside her and that she was holding his hand. It was not love at first sight. The child did not know, and never inquired what it was. She had got some one—some one belonging to her like other people, some one who did not sneer or ridicule, but smiled at her: who called her name softly: who found no fault. She was altogether transported by this wonderful sensation. She wanted no more; no mothers nor sisters, no change, no conditions such as make life possible. She knew nothing about all that. Her understanding had nothing to do with the question. It was barely developed, not equal to any strain; and in this matter it seemed quite possible to do without it; whether she understood or not did not matter. She was happy; she wanted nothing more.

"Must you go away?" she cried with a start, holding his hand closer, as he moved.

"Not to leave you," he said; "but if we go away to-morrow—Can you go to-morrow, Innocent?"

"I will go when you go," she said.

"My dear cousin, you must be less vague. Can you be ready? Can you have your packing done, and all your little affairs settled? Where is your maid? She will know best."

"I have no maid. I have nothing to pack. I am ready now, whenever you please; only you must not leave me. You must never leave me," she cried, clasping her hands round his arm.

"I have no intention of leaving you," he said, half flattered, half embarrassed, "till I have taken you to my mother. It is my mother whom you are going to—my mother—I told you—and Ellinor——"

"Will you leave me when we get there?" the girl asked eagerly, still holding him. Yes, it was flattering; but possibly it might become a bore.

"No, no," he said, "I live there too. I am not going to leave you. But my mother will be the chief person then—my mother and Nelly, not me. They are ladies, they will be your chief friends and companions——"

"I would rather have you; I know you; and I don't like women," said the girl. "Listen! Could not we live somewhere without letting them know? I can cook some dishes—very good maccaroni; and I can cook birds. I could do what you wanted, and make your *spese*. This would be far better than going to live with your mother. I do not like women."

She warmed as she spoke, turning to face him, with her hand still clasping his arm.

"You must not say such things," he said.

"Why? This is the first time you have said 'you must not.' My father says women are all bad—not some here and there like men. I am one, but I cannot help it. I always try to be different. I would not do the things they do—nor look like them if I could help it. Are you rich?"

"No," said Frederick, becoming bewildered. He had risen up, but she detained him with her two hands holding his arm.

"That is a pity. We were never rich. If you had been rich we might have taken Niccolo, who could have done everything—he is so clever. We might have stayed here. Stop!" she said suddenly, "there is a little cloud coming up over your face. Do not let it. Smile. You smiled when you came in first, and I knew that it was you, and was so happy."

"My poor child! Why were you happy?"

"Because I knew it was you," she said vehemently. "And now you talk of your mother. I do not want to go to your mother. Let me stay with you."

"Listen, Innocent," he said, with a shade of impatience stealing over him. "There is no possibility of questioning where you are to go. You must go to my mother. I live there too. I cannot afford to have a house for myself. You must learn to be fond of my mother, and do whatever she wishes. Now let me go, please. I am going out to see the place. If we leave to-morrow, I may not have another opportunity. Come, come, you must let me go."

She was looking up into his face, studying it intently, as if it were a book, a close, penetrating gaze, before which his eyes somewhat wavered, hesitating to meet hers. An idea that she would find him out if she gazed thus into the depths of his soul crossed his mind and made him half angry, half afraid. Perhaps she divined this feeling; for she let his arm go slowly, sliding her hands away from it, with a half caressing, half apologetic motion. She smiled as she thus released him, but said nothing. There was something pretty in the act by which she set him free—a mingling of resignation and entreaty that at once amused and touched him. Go if you will—it seemed to say—but yet stay with me! It was hard to resist the moral restraint after the physical was withdrawn. But Frederick reflected that to spend this his only day in a strange new place—in Italy—shut up *tête-a-tête* with a girl who was a stranger to him, though she was his cousin, would be extremely ridiculous. Yet he could not leave her abruptly. He stroked her soft hair once more paternally as he stood by her.

"I will come back in time to take you out to this lady's to dinner," he said. "I suppose they have been kind to you? And in the meantime you must see after your packing. I have no doubt you will find a great many things to do. I am sorry you have not a maid to help you. Have you wraps for the journey? You will *want something* warm."

She took up her old velvet mantle with a startled look, and turned it round in her hands, looking at it. It was a garment to delight the very soul of a painter; but, alas! it was not such a garment as Frederick Eastwood, who was not a painter, could walk about by the side of, or travel with.

"Is that all you have?" he asked, with a little dismay.

"I have a shawl," said Innocent, looking at him with astonished eyes.

"Ah! I must speak to Mrs. Drainham about it," he said, with some impatience. "Good-bye for the moment. Will you dress and be quite ready when I come back? and then we can have a talk about our start to-morrow and all our arrangements. I am ure if you are to be ready in time there is not a moment to lose."

Ready in time! The words seemed to echo about poor Innocent's ears when he was gone. Ready for what? For going out with him in the evening to the house of the lady who found fault with her; who had come to her and talked and talked so much that the girl neither tried nor wished to understand. Ready! She sat and tried to think what it meant. She had but the black frock she wore—no other—with its little black frill of crape about her neck; no edge of white, such as people wear in England. She could smooth her hair, and put on a locket, or her mother's brooch; but that was all she could do. The packing she never thought of. Niccolo had been nurse and valet combined. He had always arranged everything, and told her what to do. She sat for a long time quite still, pondering over the mourning with a strange happiness and a still stranger poignant pain in her agitated breast. Then she rose, and putting her cloak round her—the poor cloak which she was afraid *he* had despised—she went down the long stairs and across the road to the tiny little church upon the edge of the Arno. Nobody who has been in Pisa will forget Santa Maria della Spina. I do not know whether its tiny size took the girl's fancy, or if the richness of the elaborate architecture pleased her, for she had no such clearly developed ideas about art as her relations in England gave her credit for. Perhaps after all it was but a child's fancy for the dim, decorated religious place, which, notwithstanding its mystery and silence, and the awe which hung about it, was not so big as the great bare *salone* in which she sat at home. She went in, crossing herself according to the custom which she had seen all her life, mechanically, without any thought of the meaning of that sign, and held out her hand to give the holy water to a peasant woman who entered along with her, mechanically too, as she might have offered any habitual courtesy. This poor girl had scarcely been taught anything except what her eyes taught her. She went in, according to her custom, and knelt for a minute on a chair, and then, turning it round, sat down with her face to the altar. I think what she said under her breath was simply the Lord's Prayer,

nothing more. It was very brief and mechanical too, and when she sat down I cannot pretend that her thoughts were of a religious kind. They were possessed by the occurrences of the morning. Her heart was in a tumult, rising and falling like the waves of the sea. The dead stillness with which the day before she had sat in the same place, full of a certain dumb, wistful quiet—almost stupor of mind, had passed away from her. Life had come along with the new living figure which had placed itself in the foreground of her picture. Her heart beat with the vibration of her first strange childish happiness at the sight of her cousin; but in the very midst of this there came a sting of sharp wonder and pain, that acute surprised disappointment which women are apt to feel when the man whose company they themselves prefer to everything shows himself capable of going away from them, and preferring some kind of pleasure separate from them to that which can be had in their society. "If he was glad to find me, if he came so far for me, why could not he have stayed with me?" Innocent was not sufficiently advanced either in intellectual or emotional life to put such a question into words, but it was vaguely in her mind, filling her in her childish inexperience with a pain almost as great as the new pleasure which had come with her new friend. The morning masses were all over; there was no service going on, no candles lighted upon the altar, which glimmered with all its tall white tapers through the gloom. Everything was silent; now and then a half seen figure stealing in, dropping down to say a prayer or two, and with mysterious genuflexion gliding away again. A few people, like Innocent, sat in different corners quite still, with their eyes towards the altar; they were chiefly old people, worn old women and benumbed old men, doing nothing, perhaps thinking nothing, glad only, like the forlorn child, of the peacefulness, the stillness, the religiousness about. Here and there was one who, with clasped hands and rapt face, gazed up at some dark picture on the wall, and "wrestled" like Jacob; but the most part showed little emotion of any kind; they found a shelter perhaps for their confused thoughts, perhaps only for the torpor of their worn-out faculties. But anyhow, they were the better for being there, and so was Innocent. She sat quite still for a long time, rather the subject of her thoughts than exercising any control over them, and then she turned her chair round again and knelt and said the Lord's Prayer, and went away.

She went to Mrs. Drainham's with her cousin as mechanically as she had said her prayers. Her appearance was strange enough on that strange evening, which she passed as in a dream. With an idea that ornament was necessary, and perhaps not without some pleasure in the novelty of having the little morocco box full of trinkets, which her father had always kept in his own hands, *handed over* to her keeping, she had put on a trinket which took *her fancy, and which* was attached to a little chain. It was a very

brilliant ornament indeed, set with emeralds and rubies, in a quaint design, the background of which was formed by small diamonds. The effect of this upon her very simple black frock may be conceived. Mrs. Drainham was scandalized, yet impressed. Impossible not to look upon a girl possessed of such a jewel with some additional respect—and yet the impropriety, the unappropriateness of wearing it at such a time was almost "past speaking of," Mrs. Drainham felt.

"You should wear nothing but jet ornaments with such deep mourning," she said. "A plain gold locket might have done if you have no jet; but this, my dear, is quite out of character. You must try and recollect these things when you go among your relations. They will wonder that you know so little. They might perhaps think it heartless of you. Was it your mother's? It is very pretty. You must take great care of such an ornament as this; but you must be sure never to wear it when you are in mourning." This was said when she was alone in the drawing-room with Innocent after dinner. And then she, too, began to inquire into the packing and the wraps for the journey. She gave Innocent a great deal of advice, which I fear was quite lost upon her, and offered to go next day to "see to" her preparations. The girl sat much as she had sat in the Church of the Spina, with her hands crossed on her lap, listening vaguely. She did not know what to say, and her attention wandered often as the stream of counsel flowed on. She had done no packing still, and had no idea what to do about the wraps; and Frederick scarcely seemed to belong to her, in this strange room, where she sat in a kind of waking dream, ashamed of her poor frock, ashamed of her rich jewel, not knowing what to make of herself. Poor little Innocent! perhaps, on the whole, in this new rush of emotions that filled her there was rather less pleasure than pain.

CHAPTER IX.

AT HOME.

WHEN Mrs. Eastwood received, after a long and anxious waiting, Frederick's letter from Leghorn, telling her of his illness and detention in Paris ("the last place in the world one would like to be ill in," she said in her innocence), she was, as might be supposed, greatly agitated and distressed. Her first thought was for his health, poor fellow! her second for the office, and whether he could get an extension of leave, or if this staying away without permission *would injure him.* She did not quite know which of her

counsellors to send for in such an emergency, and therefore she did what she would have done in any case, whether her advisers had bidden her or not. After she had wondered with Ellinor what it could have been, and why he gave them no details, and had cried over the bad news, and taken comfort at the thought he was better, she sent for her habitual fly, the vehicle which she had patronized ever since she put down her carriage. It was a very respectable fly, with a sensible brown horse, which never got into any trouble, as the horses of private individuals do, but would stand as patiently at a door of its own free will as if it knew there was a place round the corner where its inferior brother, the coachman, went to refresh himself, and sympathized in his thirst. Mrs. Eastwood and Ellinor got into this respectable vehicle about twelve o'clock, and drove by Whitehall and the Horse Guards to the Sealing-Wax Office. There they found the head of the office, Mr. Bellingham, who had just come in from his cottage in the country, with a rosebud in his coat, which came from his own conservatory, and had roused the envy of all the young men as he came by. Mrs. Eastwood explained that Frederick had been detained by illness in Paris. He had not written sooner in order that his friends might not be anxious, she explained, and she hoped, as it was totally unforeseen, and very, very inconvenient to himself, that there would be no difficulty in the office. Mr. Bellingham smiled upon her, and said he would make all that right. "Jolly place to be ill in," he said with a little nod and smile. "Indeed, I thought it the very last place in the world for a sick person," said Mrs. Eastwood, feeling somehow that her boy's sufferings were held too lightly; "so little privacy, so much noise and bustle; and in a hotel, of course, the comforts of home are not to be looked for." It seemed to Ellinor that Mr. Bellingham's countenance bore traces of a suppressed grin, but he said nothing more than that a letter had been received at the office from the sufferer, and that, of course, under the circumstances, there would be no question about the extended leave. "That is all right, at least," Mrs. Eastwood said as they left the office; but it may well be supposed that to wait ten days for any news whatever of the absent son, and at the end of that period, when they began to expect his return, to hear that he had been ill all the time within reach of them was not pleasant. The mother and daughter could talk of nothing else as they drove home.

"If he had but written at first, when he felt himself getting ill, you or I, or both of us, might have gone to him, Nelly. I cannot think of anything more dreary than being ill in an inn. And then the expense! I wonder if he has money enough, poor boy, to bring him home?"

"If he wanted money he would have told you so," said Nelly, *half uneasy, she could* not quite tell why.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Eastwood, "boys are so odd. To be sure, when they want money they generally let one know. But there never was anything so tiresome, so vague, as men's letters about themselves. 'I have been ill.'—Now if it had been you or me, Nelly, we should have said, 'I took cold, or I got a bad headache,' or whatever it was, on such a day—and how it got worse or better; and when we were able to get up again, or to get out again. It is not Frederick alone. It is every man. They tell you just enough to make you unhappy—never any details. I suppose," she added, with a sigh, "it is because that sort of meagre information is enough for themselves. They don't care to know all about it as women do. They don't understand what it is to be really anxious. In a great many ways, Nelly, men have the advantage over us—things, too, that no laws can change."

"I don't think it is an advantage not to care," said Nelly indignantly.

"I am not so sure of that," said her mother. "We care so much that we can't think of anything else. We can't take things calmly as they do. And they have an advantage in it. Frederick is a very good son, but if I were to write to him, 'I have been ill, and I am better,' he would be quite satisfied, he would want nothing more. Whereas I want a great deal more," Mrs. Eastwood said, flicking off with her finger the ghost of a tear which had gathered, in spite of her, in the corner of her eye, and giving a short little broken laugh. The path of fathers and mothers is often strewn with roses, but the roses have very big thorns. Even Nelly, who was young, whose heart leapt forward to a future of her own, in which brothers had but little share, did not here quite comprehend her mother. For her own part, had she been left to herself, it is possible that Frederick's "I have been ill, but I am better," would have satisfied all her anxieties; but as the girl by force of sympathy was but half herself and half her mother, she entered into the feelings which she did not altogether share with a warmth which was increased by partisanship, if such a word can be used in such a case.

"It is wicked of him not to write more fully," she said.

"No, Nelly, dear, not wicked, only thoughtless; all men are the same," said Mrs. Eastwood. And to be sure this large generalization affords a little comfort now and then to women, as the same principle does to men in different circumstances; for there is nothing about which the two halves of humanity are so fond of generalizing as each other. It seems to afford a certain consolation that "all men are just the same," or that "women are like that everywhere"—an explanation which, at least, partially exonerates the immediate offender.

Another week elapsed, during which the Eastwoods carried on their existence much as usual, unmoved to appearance by the delay,

and not deeply disturbed by the prospect of the new arrival. Mrs. Eastwood spoke to Mr. Brotherton, her rector and adviser about "the boys," on the subject, but not much came of it; for Mr. Brotherton, though fond, like most people, of giving advice, and feeling, like most people, that a widow with sons to educate was his lawful prey, was yet shy of saying anything on the subject of Frederick, who was no longer a boy. Whether any more serious uneasiness lay underneath her anxiety for her son's health, no one, not even Mrs. Eastwood's chief and privy councillor, could have told; but when appealed to as to what he thought on the subject, whether another messenger or the mother herself should go to the succour of the invalid, Mr. Brotherton shook his head and did not know what to advise. "If he has been able to go on to Leghorn, I think you may feel very confident that he is all right again," he said. "You must not make yourself unhappy about him. From Leghorn to Pisa is but a step," added the Rector, pleased to be able to recall his own experience on this subject. But Mrs. Everard, the Privy Councillor, was of a different opinion. She was always for action in every case. To sit still and wait was a policy which had no attractions for her. She was a slight and eager woman, who had been a great beauty in her day. Her husband had been a judge in India, and she was, or thought she was, deeply instructed in the law, and able to be "of real service" to her friends, when legal knowledge was requisite. It is almost unnecessary to say that she was as unlike Mrs. Eastwood as one woman could be to another. The one was eager, slight, and restless, with a mind much too active for her body, and an absolute incapacity for letting anything alone; the other plump and peaceable, not deficient in energy when it was necessary, but slightly inert and slow to move when the emergency did not strike her as serious. Of course it is equally unnecessary to add that Mrs. Everard also was a widow. This fact acts upon the character like other great facts in life. It makes many and important modifications in the aspect of affairs. Life *à deux* (I don't know any English phrase which quite expresses this) is scarcely more different from the primitive and original single life than is the life which, after having been *à deux*, becomes single, without the possibility of going back to the original standing ground. That curious mingling of a man's position and responsibilities with a woman's position and responsibilities, cannot possibly fail to mould a type of character in many respects individual. A man who is widowed is not similarly affected, partly perhaps because in most cases he throws the responsibility from him, and either marries again or places some woman in the deputy position of governess or housekeeper to represent the feminine side of life, which he does not choose to take upon himself. Women, however, abandon their post much less frequently, and sometimes, I suspect, *get quite* reconciled to the double burden, and do not object to do all

for, and be all to, their children. Sometimes they attempt too much, and often enough they fail; but so does everybody in everything, and widows' sons have not shown badly in general life. I hope the gentle reader will pardon me this digression, which, after all, is scarcely necessary, since it is the business of the ladies in this history to speak for themselves.

"I would go if I were in your place," said Mrs. Everard, talking over all these circumstances in the twilight over the fire the same evening. "A man, as we both know, never tells you anything fully. Of course you cannot tell in the least what is the matter with him. He may have overtasked his strength going on to Pisa. He may break down on the road home, with no one to look after him. I suppose this girl will be a helpless foreign thing without any knowledge of the world. Girls are brought up so absurdly abroad. You know my opinion, dear, on the whole subject. I always advised you—instead of taking this trouble and bringing her here with great expense and inconvenience, to make her an inmate of your own house—I always advised you to settle her where she is, paying her expenses among the people she knows. You remember what I told you about poor Adelaide Forbes?—what a mistake she made, meaning to be kind! You know your own affairs best; but still on this point I think I was right."

"Perhaps you may have been," said Mrs. Eastwood, from the gloom of the corner in which she was seated, "but there are some things that one cannot do, however much one's judgment may be convinced. Leave my own flesh and blood to languish among strangers? I could not do it; it would have been impossible."

"If your flesh and blood had been a duchess, you would have done it without a thought," said Mrs. Everard. "She is happy where she is (I suppose). You don't know her temper nor her ways of thinking, nor what kind of girl she is, and yet you will insist upon bringing her here——"

"You speak as if Frederick's illness was mamma's doing," said Nelly, with a little indignation, coming in from one of her many occupations, and placing herself on a stool in front of the fire, in the full glow of the firelight. Nelly was not afraid of her complexion. She did everything a girl ought not to do in this way. She would run out in the sunshine unprotected by veil or parasol, and she had a child's trick of reading by firelight, which, considering how she scorched her cheeks, can scarcely be called anything short of wicked. This was a point upon which Mrs. Everard kept up a vigorous but unsuccessful struggle.

"Nelly, Nelly! you will burn your eyes out. By the time you are my age how much eyesight will you have left, do you think?"

"I don't *much care*," said Nelly, in an undertone. She thought

that by the time she reached Mrs. Everard's age (which was under fifty) she would have become indifferent to eyesight and everything else, in the chills of that advanced age.

"Nelly, you are not too civil," said Mrs. Eastwood, touching the toe of Nelly's pretty shoe with her own velvet slipper, in warning and reproof. The girl drew her toes out of the way, but did not make any apology. She was not fond of Mrs. Everard, nor indeed was any one in the house.

"Of course, I don't mean that your decision had anything whatever to do with Frederick's illness," Mrs. Everard resumed, "that I don't need to say. He might have been ill at home as much as abroad. I am speaking now on the original question. Of course, if Frederick had not gone away, you would have been spared this anxiety, and might have nursed him comfortably at home. But that is incidental. What I *am* sorry for is that you are bringing a girl into your house whom you know nothing of. She may be very nice, but she may be quite the reverse. Of course one can never tell whether it may or may not be a happy change even for her—but it is a great risk for you. It is a very brave thing to do. I should not have the courage to make such an experiment, though it would be a great deal simpler in my house, where there is no one to be affected but myself."

"I don't see where the courage lies," said Nelly; "a girl of sixteen. What harm could she do to any one?"

"Oh, a great deal of harm, if she chose," said Mrs. Everard; "a girl of sixteen, in a house full of young men! One or the other of them will fall in love with her to a certainty if she is at all pretty——"

"Oh, please!" said Mrs. Eastwood; "you do think so oddly, pardon me for saying so, about the boys. Frederick is grown up, of course, but the last young man in the world to think of a little cousin. And as for Dick, he is a mere boy; and Jenny? Don't be vexed if I laugh. This is too funny."

"I hope you will always think it as funny," said the Privy Councillor solemnly, "but I know you and I don't think alike on these subjects. Half the ridiculous marriages in the world spring out of the fact that parents will not see when boys and girls start up into men and women. I don't mean to say that harm will come of it immediately—but once she is in your house there is no telling how you are to get rid of her. However, I suppose your mind is made up. About the other matter here are the facts of the case. Frederick is ill, you don't know how or with what; he has taken a long and dangerous journey——"

"Not dangerous, dear, not dangerous——"

"Well, not dangerous if you please, but long and fatiguing, and *troublesome* to a man who is ill. He has gone on to Pisa in a bad *state of health.* You know that he has reached so far; and you

know no more. Of course he will be anxious to get home again as quickly as possible. What if he were to get worse on the road? There is nothing more likely, and the torturing anxiety you would feel in such circumstances I need not suggest to you. You will be terribly unhappy. You will wait for news until you feel it impossible to wait any longer, and then when your strength and patience are exhausted, you will rush off to go to him—most likely too late."

"Oh, have a little pity upon me! Don't talk so—don't think so——"

"I can't stop my thoughts," said Mrs. Everard, not without a little complacency, "and I have known such things to happen before now. What more likely than that he should start before he is equal to the journey, and break down on the way home? Then you would certainly go to him; and my advice is, go to him now. Anticipating the evil in that way, you would probably prevent it. In your place I would not lose a day."

"But I could not reach Pisa," said Mrs. Eastwood, nervously taking out her watch, "I could not reach Pisa, even if I were to start to-night, before they had left it; and how can I tell which way they would come? I should miss them to a certainty. I should get there just when they were arriving here. I should have double anxiety, and double expense——"

"If they ever arrived here," said Mrs. Everard ominously; "but indeed it is not my part to interfere. Some people can bear anxiety so much better than others. I know it would kill me."

Mrs. Eastwood very naturally objected to such a conclusion. To put up with the imputation of feeling less than her friend, or any other woman, in the circumstances, was unbearable. "Then you really think I have reason to be alarmed?" she said in a tremulous voice.

"I should not have any doubt on the subject," said her adviser. "A young man in delicate health, a long journey, cold February weather, and not even a doctor whom you can rely upon to see him before he starts. Recollect I would not say half so much if I did not feel quite sure that you would be forced to go at last—and probably too late."

"Oh, don't say those awful words!" said the poor woman. And thus the conversation went on, till Brownlow appeared with the lamp, interrupting the agitating discussion. Then Mrs. Everard went her way, leaving her friend in very low spirits with Nelly, who, though kept up by a wholesome spirit of opposition, was yet moved, in spite of herself, by the gloomy picture upon which she had been looking. They sat together over the fire for a little longer, very tearful and miserable, while Mrs. Everard went home, strong in the sense of having done her duty "however things might turn out."

"Must you really go, mamma?" said Nelly, much subdued, consulting her watch, in her turn, and thinking of the hurried start at eight o'clock to catch the night train, and of the dismal midnight crossing of that Channel which travellers hate and fear. "It will be a dreadful journey. Must you really go?"

"What do *you* think, Nelly?" said Mrs. Eastwood, beginning to recover a little. "I have the greatest respect for Jane Everard's opinion, but she does always take the darkest view of everything. Oh, Nelly, what would *you* advise me to do?"

This was an infallible sign that the mercury had begun to rise. "Pressure had decreased," to use a scientific term. The mother and daughter made up their minds, after much discussion, that to catch the night train would be impossible, and that there might perhaps be further news next day. "If that is your opinion, Nelly?" Mrs. Eastwood said, as they went up-stairs, supporting herself with natural casuistry upon her child's counsel. The fact was that she herself saw very clearly all the practical difficulties of the question. She loved advice, and did not think it correct for "a woman in my position" to take any important step without consulting her friends; and their counsel moved her deeply. She gave all her attention to it, and received it with respectful conviction; but she did not take it. It would be impossible to overestimate the advantage this gave her over all her advisers.

"I knew she had made up her mind," Mrs. Everard said next day, with resignation. Whatever might happen she had done her duty; and the consequences must certainly fall on the culprit's own head.

CHAPTER X.

THE ARRIVAL.

To the reader who is better acquainted with the causes and character of Frederick Eastwood's detention on his journey than either his mother or her Privy Councillor, the fears entertained by these ladies in respect to his health will scarcely appear deserving of much consideration. His health, indeed, very soon came right again. Two days' rest at Pisa, the substitution of the *vin du pays* for champagne, and the absence of other excitements, made him quite equal to contemplate the journey home without anxiety, so far as his own interesting person was concerned. He had difficulties enough, however, of another kind. He was obliged to stay a day longer than he intended, in order to fit out his cousin with various things pronounced by Mrs. Drainham to be indispensable. She had to be

clothed in something more fit for a journey than the thin black frock which Niccolo had ordered for her at her father's death. Pisa did not afford much in the way of toilette; but still the dress and cloak procured by Mrs. Drainham were presentable; and the fastidious young man was extremely grateful to the physician's pretty wife for clothing his companion so that he should not be ashamed to be seen with her, which would have been the case had the poor child travelled, as she intended, in her only warm garment, the velvet cloak.

"It must have been a stage property in its day," Frederick said, looking at the many tints of its old age with disgust.

Innocent hid it away instantly in the depths of her old trunk, and sat proudly shivering with cold in her thin frock through all the long evening,—the cold, long, lingering night which preceded their departure. She thought her cousin would have come to her; but Frederick wisely reflected that he would have enough of her society for the next few days, and preferred the Drainhams' comfortable drawing-room instead. Poor Innocent! she stood in the old way at the window, but not impassive as of old, looking for some one this time, and trying with a beating heart to make him out among the crowd that moved along the Lung' Arno. This expectation engrossed her so much that she forgot to think of the change that was about to come upon her life. I do not know, indeed, that she was capable of thinking of anything so complex as this change. She had wandered from one place to another with her father, living always the same dreary, secluded life, having such simple wants as she was conscious of supplied, and nothing ever required of her. I believe, had it been suggested to her unawakened mind that thenceforward she must do without Niccolo, this would have been the most forcible way of rousing her to thought of what was about to happen. And, indeed, this was exactly the course which was about to be taken, though without any idea on the part of Niccolo of the effect it would produce. He came in as usual with his little tray, the salad heaped up, green and glistening with oil just as he liked it himself. Beside it, as this was the last evening, was a small, but smoking hot, dish of maccaroni, a morsel of cheese on a plate, and a *petit pain*, more delicate than the dry Italian bread. The usual small flask of red wine flanked this meal, which Niccolo brought in with some state, as became the little festa which he had prepared for his charge. Tears were in the good fellow's eyes, though his beard was divided in its blackness by the kind smile which displayed his red lips and white teeth. He arranged it on the little table close by the stove, placed the chair beside it, and trimmed the lamp before he called upon his Signorina, whose position by the window he had immediately remarked with a shrug of his shoulders. He had taken care of her all her life; but I am not sure that the good Niccolo was not glad to be relieved of a charge so embarrassing. His own prospects were

certainly brightened by her departure. He had served her father faithfully and long with but poor recompense, and now the reward of his faithfulness was coming to Niccolo in the shape of a better place, with higher wages, and a position which was very splendid in his eyes. Never was heart more disposed to entertain a romantic devotion for the child he had nurtured; but it is difficult for the warmest heart to give itself up in blind love to an utterly unresponsive being, whether child or man, and as Innocent did not love Niccolo or any one else the separation from her was less hard than it might otherwise have been. Nevertheless there were tears in his eyes, and his heart was softened and melting when he arranged her supper for her, and went to the cold window to call her to her solitary meal. He touched her shoulder caressingly with his hand.

"Santissima Madonna!" cried Niccolo, "you will die of cold, my poor young lady; you have nothing but this thin dress, which cannot keep you warm. Where in the name of all the saints is your cloak?"

"I have put it away. It is ugly; it is not fit to wear," cried Innocent. "It is a thing of the theatre. Why did you let me wear it?" and she put off his hand gently enough, but coldly, and continued her watch.

"A thing of the theatre!" cried Niccolo, indignant, "when I bought it myself at the sale of the pittore Inglese, who died over the way; and you looked like a princess when you put it on, and warm as a bird in a nest. But I know who it is that turns you against your old dresses, and your old way of living, and your poor old Niccolo. It is the cousin. I hope he will be to you all we have been, Signorina. But in the meantime my young lady is served, and if she does not eat, the maccaroni will be cold. Cold maccaroni is good for no one. The cousin will not come to-night."

"You do not know," said Innocent, turning a momentary look upon him, which was half a defiance and half a question.

"But I do know," said Niccolo; "he went to the house of the English doctor half an hour ago, and bid me tell the Signorina to be prepared at ten to-morrow. Come, then, to the maccaroni. When everything else fails it is always good to have maccaroni to fall back upon. *Chi ha buon pane, e buon vino, ha troppo un micolino.*"

"I do not care for maccaroni," said Innocent. She turned from the window, however, with a dawning of the pride of a woman who feels herself slighted. "Niccolo, I do not want anything: you can go away."

"And this is how she parts with the old Niccolo!" he cried. "I have carried her in my arms when she was little. I have dressed *her, and prepared* for her to eat and drink all her life. I have *taken her to the festa,* and to the church. I have done all for her





"*She* clung to him with a look of sudden alarm."

—all! and the last night she tells me, 'I do not want anything, Niccolo; you may go away.'"

"The last night?" said Innocent, moved a little. She shivered with the cold, and with the pang of desertion, and with that new-born sense of her loneliness which had never struck her before. She knelt down by the stove to get a little warmth, and turned her eyes inquiringly upon him. She knew what he meant very well, and yet she did not know.

"The last night," said Niccolo. "To-morrow evening you will be upon the great sea; you will be on your way to your relations, to your England, which cannot be colder than your heart, Signorina. I weep, for I cannot forget that you were once a little child, and that I carried you in my arms. When I reflect that it is fifteen years, fifteen years that I have taken care of you, from the moment your nurse left you, *disgraziata!* and that after to-morrow I shall see you no more! Whatever has to be done for you must be done by others, or will not be done at all, which is more likely. When you want anything you may call 'Niccolo, Niccolo;' but there will be no Niccolo to reply. If I were to permit myself to think of all this I should become *pazzo*, Signorina—though you don't care."

Innocent said nothing; but slowly the reality of this tremendous alteration in her lot made itself apparent to her. No Niccolo! She could not realize it. With Niccolo, too, many other things would disappear. She looked round the lofty bare walls, which, indeed, had few attractions except those of use and wont, and faintly it dawned upon her that her whole life and everything that was familiar to her was about to vanish away. Large tears filled her eyes; she turned to Niccolo an appealing, beseeching look. "I do not understand," she cried, with a panting breath; and put out her hands, and clung to him. He who was about to be left behind was the emblem of all the known, the familiar—I do not say the dear, for the girl's heart and soul had been sealed up, and she loved nothing. But she knew him, and relied upon him, and had that child's trust that he would never fail her, which is often all that a child knows of love. No Niccolo! She did not understand how existence was to go on without him. She clung to him with a look of sudden alarm and dismay in her dilated eyes.

The good Niccolo was satisfied. He had not wished or attempted to rouse that miserable, vague sense of desertion and abandonment of which he had no comprehension; but he was satisfied to have brought out some evidence of feeling, and also that his dramatic appeal had produced the due effect. "My dearest young lady!" he said, wiping the great tears from her eyes with his own red handkerchief, a service which he, indeed, had performed many a time before. "Carissima Signorina mia! There will never be a day of my life that I will not think of you, nor shall I ever enter a church without *putting* the blessed Madonna in mind of my poor, dear,

well-beloved young lady who has no mother! Never, carina! never, my child, my little mistress! You may always rely upon your old Niccolo; and when my young lady marries a rich milordo she will come back to Pisa, and seek out her old servant, and say to the handsome, beautiful young husband, 'This is my old Niccolo, that brought me up!' Ah, carina mia," cried the good fellow, laughing and crying, and applying the red handkerchief first to Innocent's cheeks and then to his own, "that will be a magnificent day to look forward to! The young milordo will say immediately, 'Niccolo shall be the maestro della casa; he shall live and die in my service.' Ah, my beautiful Signorina, what happiness! I will go with you to England or anywhere. You were born to be our delight!" cried Niccolo, carried away by his feelings, and evidently imagining that the *giorno magnifico* had arrived already. Innocent, however, did not follow these rapid vicissitudes of feeling. To get one clear idea into her mind was difficult enough. Sometimes she looked at him, sometimes into the little fire, with its ruddy embers. Her head was giddy, her heart dully aching. All was going away from her; the room, the walls, seemed to turn slowly round, as if they would dissolve and break up into vapour. The very dumbness of her heart made this vague sense of misery the more terrible; she could say nothing. She could not have told what she felt or what she feared; but all the world seemed to be dissolving about her into coldness and darkness and loneliness; the cold penetrated to her very soul; she was miserable, as we may imagine a dumb animal to be, without any way of relieving itself of the confused pain in its mind.

Niccolo, after a while, became alarmed, and devoted himself to her restoration with all the tender kindness of his race. He rushed to the trunk, and got out the old mantle, in which he wrapped her; he put the scaldino into her hands, he brought her wine, and petted and smiled her back into composure. He carried the largest scaldino in the house, full of the reddest embers, into her stony bedroom. "It is not the cold," he said to himself, "it is the sorrow, poverina! poverina! Let no one say after this that she has not a tender heart." And when she went to bed Niccolo stayed up all night—cheerful, yet sad—to finish the packing, to set everything straight, and to leave the apartment in such order that the Marchese Scaramucci might have no grievance against his tenant, and as small a bill of repairs as possible. Good, kindly soul; he was rather glad though, on the whole, that to-morrow he was going to the new master, who was rich, and kept a number of servants, and who, being a milordo, might perhaps be cheated now and then in a friendly way.

And next morning Innocent's old world did break up into clouds and vapours. For the last time she stole over to the little church in the dark morning, and said the Lord's Prayer, and then sat still, looking at the little altar, where this time the candles were lighted,

and a priest saying mass. The mass had nothing to do with Innocent. The drone of the monotonous voice, the gleam of the candles, made no sort of impression upon her. Her imagination was as little awakened as her heart was. If she thought of anything at all it was, with a sore sense of a wound somewhere, that Frederick had left her, that he had not come near her, that he was happy away from her; but all quite vague; nothing definite in it, except the pang. And then Santa Maria della Spina, and the high houses opposite, and the yellow river below, and the clustered buildings about the Duomo, and all Pisa, in short, melted into the clouds, and rolled away like a passing storm, and the new world began.

What kind of a strange phantasmagoric world this was, full of glares of light and long stretches of darkness; of black, plunging, angry waves, ready to drown the quivering, creaking, struggling vessel, which carried her and her fortunes; then of lights again wavering and dancing before the eyes, which were still unsteady from the sea; and once more the long sweep of the railway through the night, more lights, more darkness, succeeding and succeeding each other like the changes in a dream—we need not attempt to describe. It was four days after their start from Pisa, when her strength was quite worn out by the continuous and unusual fatigue both to body and mind, her nerves shaken, and all her powers of sensation dulled, when, shuddering at the sight, she came again to the short but angry sea which had to be crossed to England. It was not a "silver streak" that day. There are a great many days in the year, as the traveller knows, in which it is anything but a "silver streak." In short, few things wilder, darker, more tempestuous, and terrible could be conceived than the black belt of Channel across which Innocent fought her way in the Dover steamboat to where a darker shadow lay upon the edge of the boiling water, a shadow which was England. For a wonder, she was not sea-sick. Frederick, whose self-control under such circumstances was dubious, had established her in a corner, and then had left her, not coming near her again till they entered the harbour, which was no unkindness on his part, but an effort of self-preservation, which the most *exigeant* would have approved. He had been very good to her on the journey, studying her comfort in every way, taking care of her almost as Niccolo had done, excusing all her little misadventures with her hand-bag, and the shawl she carried over her arm. He had let her head rest upon his shoulder; he had allowed her to hold his hand fast when the steamboat went up and down on the Mediterranean. These days of fatigue had been halcyon days of perfect repose and confidence in her companion. The poor child had never known any love in her barren life, and this kindness, which she did not know either, seemed in her eyes something heavenly, delicious beyond power of description. It had never been possible for her to cling to any one before, and yet her nature

and breeding both made her dependent and helpless in her ignorance. Frederick appeared to her in such a light as had as yet touched nothing else in earth or heaven. Her heart woke to him and clung to him, but went no further. Her eyes searched all the dark figures on the deck in search of him when self-preservation drove him from her side. A cloud—an additional cloud—came on the world when he was absent. She felt no interest in the darksome England which loomed out of the mists; no curiosity even about the home it enclosed, or the unknown women who would hereafter so strangely affect her happiness. She gazed blankly at the cliffs rising through the fog, at the lights blown about by the wind, which shone out upon the stormy sea, and the bustle on the shore of the crowd which awaited the arrival of the steamer. All that she felt was again that ache (but slighter than before) to think that Frederick liked to be away from her, chose to leave her. For her part, she felt only half living and not at all real when he was not near enough to be touched. He was all she had left of reality out of the dissolving views into which the past had broken up; she might be dreaming but for him. When he came to her side at last in Dover Harbour, she caught at his arm and clasped it, and stood close up to him, holding on as to an anchor in the midst of all her confusion. Frederick did not dislike the heavy claim thus made upon him. The girl was very young, and almost beautiful in her strange way. She was ice except to him. She had thrown herself into his arms the first time they met, and a certain complacency of superiority, which was very sweet, mingled with the sense of protecting and sustaining care with which he looked upon the creature thus entirely dependent on him.

"Now the worst of our troubles is over," he said cheerfully, though he was very white and even greenish in colour after the last hour's sufferings. "Two hours more and we shall be at home."

Innocent made no answer. She did not think at all of home; she only clung a little closer to him, as the only interpreter of all the vague and misty wonders which loomed about her. They were just about to step out of the boat, she always clinging to him, when Frederick heard himself called in a coarse but jovial voice, which at first bewildered him with surprise before he recognized it, and then gave him anything but a pleasant sensation.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. Eastwood," it said. "Horrid passage, sir; a thing not to be endured if one could help it. I've been as sick as a dog, and, judging by your colour, so have you."

"No," said Frederick coldly; but it is not easy to be politely calm to a man who has you in his power, and who could "sell you up" to-morrow if he liked without benefit of clergy. He shivered as he replied, feeling such a terror of the consequences as I should *vainly* attempt to describe. It was like the death's head at the *feast, suddenly presenting* itself when his mind was for the moment

free from all dread of it. He turned round (though he had recognized the voice) with supercilious surprise, as if he could not imagine who the speaker was.

"Oh, Mr. ——! You have been in Paris, I presume, ever since I saw you there?"

"Just so," said Batty, "and some jolly evenings we've managed to have since, I can tell you. Not your way—unlimited, you know; but in moderation. By Jove! your way was too good to last. Made out your journey comfortable, eh, Mr. Eastwood? Got a companion now, I see."

Oh, how Frederick blessed that companion for the opaqueness of her observation, for her want of interest in what was done and said around. "Yes, my cousin," he said in a quiet undertone; and added, "Now I must get her into the train, and find a place for her. I am sorry I have no time to talk to you just now. Don't be afraid that I shall forget the—the business—between us."

"No, I don't think you will," said Batty, with a horse-laugh. "You couldn't if you would, and I shouldn't let you if you wanted to. And, by the way," he said, keeping them back from the wished-for landing, "I recollected after I left you that I had never given you my address. Stop a moment, I'll find it directly."

"I will come back to you," cried Frederick, desperate, "as soon as I have placed this lady in the train."

"Just a moment," said the man, pulling out his pocket-book. "I have your address, you know. There I have the advantage," he added, with a leer into Frederick's face.

Perhaps there is no ill-doing in this world which escapes punishment one way or other. Frederick had escaped a great deal better than he had any right to hope for till this moment. But now the Fates avenged themselves. Though he was cold and shivering, he grew red to his hair with suppressed passion.

"Let me pass, for Heaven's sake!" he cried, bursting into involuntary entreaty.

"Here it is," said Mr. Batty, thrusting a card into his hand, and with a chuckle he turned round to some people behind, who were with him, and let his victim go. Frederick hurried his silent companion on shore in a tumult of miserable and angry feeling. It was the first time he had felt the prick of the obligation under which he lay. He did not make the kind and pleasant little speech which he had intended to make to Innocent as he led her on to English soil. It had been driven out of his head by this odious encounter. Heavens! he thought, if it had been Nelly instead of Innocent! and next time it might be Nelly. He hurried the girl into the train without one word, and threw in his coat, and went off to get some brandy to restore his nerves and his courage. "Hallo! Eastwood!" some one else called out to him. "Bless my life, how green you are! been ill on the crossing, eh?" This is not a confession which

the young Englishman is fond of making in a general way, but Frederick nodded and hurried on, ready to confess to anything, so long as he could be left alone. The brandy did him good, driving out the shuddering cold and putting some sort of spirit into him; for indeed it was quite true that, in addition to the mental shock, he had been ill on the crossing too.

Innocent had paid no attention to this colloquy; she received into her passive memory the voice and face of the man who had addressed her cousin; but she was not herself aware that she had done so. She was grieved when Frederick left her, and glad when he came back in a few minutes to ask if she would have anything. "No; only if you will come," she said, putting out her hand. That was all she thought of. A kind of tremor had taken possession of her, not of expectation, for she was too passive to speculate—a thrill of the nerves as she approached the end of her journey. "You will not go away from me when we get there?" she said piteously. What with his disagreeable acquaintances, and his too clinging charge, poor Frederick had enough on his hands.

"Of course, I shall not go away; but, Innocent, you must put me in the second place now," he said, patting her shoulder kindly as he sat down beside her. The answer she made was to put her hand softly within his arm. I don't think Mrs. Eastwood would have approved of it, and Frederick found it rather embarrassing, and hoped the old lady did not observe it who was in the other corner of the railway carriage; she dozed all the way to town, and he did not know her; but still a man does not like to look ridiculous. Otherwise it was not unpleasant of itself.

And then Innocent's bewildered eyes were dazzled by a blaze of lights, and noise, and crowding figures. Out of that she was put into the silence of a dingy cab, and left there, feeling unutterably lonely, and not at all sure that now at the last moment he had not forsaken her, while Frederick was absent looking after the luggage, that dismal concluding piece of misery after a long journey. By the time he came back to her she was crying, and sick with suspense and terror. And then came a last quick drive, through gleaming lights and intervals of darkness, by shop-windows and through dim lanes, till at last a door flew open in the gloom, sending forth light and warmth, and two figures rushed out of it and took her passive into their arms. She held Frederick fast with one hand while she gazed at them. This was how she came home.





Innocent's welcome "Home."

CHAPTER XI.

AT HOME AND NOT AT HOME.

ALL the events of that evening passed like a dream over the mind of Innocent. The warm, curtained, cushioned, luxurious room, with its soft carpets, its soft chairs, its draperies, its fulness and crowd of unfamiliar details, the unknown faces and sounds, the many pictures on the walls, the conversation, quick and familiar, carried on in a language which to be sure she knew perfectly, but was not accustomed to hear about her—all bewildered and confused her. She sat and looked at them with an infantile stare of half-stupefied dull wonder, not altogether understanding what they said, and not at all taking in the meaning even when she understood the words. She made scarcely any response to their many questions. She said "Yes" when they asked if she were tired, but nothing at all in reply to her aunt's warm and tearful welcome. She felt disposed to wonder why they kissed her, why they unfastened her wraps and put a footstool for her feet before the fire, and made so much fuss about her. Why did they do it? Nothing of the kind would have occurred to Innocent had they gone to her. She did not understand their kindness. It seemed to her to require some explanation, some clearing-up of the mystery. She sat with her lips shut close, with her eyes opened more widely than usual, turning to each one who spoke. She had felt no curiosity about them before she arrived, and she did not feel any curiosity now. They were new, and strange, and wonderful, not to be accounted for by any principles within her knowledge. They placed her by the fire, they took off her hat and cloak, they established her there to thaw, and be comforted.

"Dinner will be ready directly—but will you have a cup of tea first?" said Mrs. Eastwood, stroking her lank hair.

"No," said Innocent, "I am not ill." She thought, as was natural with her Italian training, that tea was a medicine.

"Would you like to go up to your room before dinner, or are you too tired, dear?" said Nelly.

"I will stay here," said the girl. This was how she answered them, always gazing at the one who spoke to her, and ever turning to give a wistful look at Frederick, who, for his part, felt himself somehow responsible for the new guest, and annoyed by the wondering looks of his mother and sister.

"Let her alone," he said, with some impatience. "Don't you see she is frightened and tired, and scarcely understands you? We have been travelling day and night since Tuesday. Innocent, are you very much tired? Should you like to go to bed? or are you able to sit up to dinner? Don't be afraid."

She looked up at him instantly responsive. She put out her hand to him, and grasped his, though this was a formula which he could have dispensed with. "Are you to sit up to dinner?" she asked. "Then I will too."

"I am the only one she knows," he said, turning to the others, half pleased, half ashamed; perhaps more than half ashamed, the young man being English, and in deadly terror of being laughed at. "I hope I am old enough to sit up to dinner," he said, carrying off a little confusion in a laugh; "but I confess after all this travelling I am tired too."

"Let me look at you, Frederick," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I see you are better; you are not so pale as when you went away. Your illness, on the whole, must have agreed with you. Why didn't you write, you unkind boy? Nelly and I would have gone over to nurse you——"

Heaven forbid! Frederick said to himself; the bare suggestion gave him a livelier idea of the dangers he had escaped than anything else had done. "No, no," he said, "a journey at this time of the year is no joke. That was the very reason I did not write; and then, of course, I was anxious to get on as quickly as I could to poor Innocent, who was being made a victim of by all the ladies, the doctress and the clergywoman, and all the rest——"

"Was she made a victim of?" said Nelly, looking at the new comer in her easy-chair, with doubtful wonder.

Innocent divined rather than understood that they were talking of her, and once more raised her eyes to Frederick with a soft smile which seemed to consent to everything he said. She seemed to the ladies to be giving confirmation to his words, whereas, in reality, it was but like the holding out of her hand—another way of showing her confidence and dependence on him.

"I took her out of their hands," said Frederick, with a delightful indifference to facts; "they would have sent her to you with a Pisan outfit, peasant costume for anything I can tell. I was very glad to get there in time. I found the poor child living in the house all alone, not even with a maid, and a dark ghostly dismal sort of house, which you would have thought would have frightened her to death."

"Poor child!" said Mrs. Eastwood, "alone without even a maid? Oh, that is dreadful! Were you frightened, my poor darling?"

"No," said Innocent, glancing at her questioner quickly, and then returning to her habitual gaze upon Frederick. This was not encouraging, but of course Frederick had been her first acquaintance, and she had come to know him. His mother dismissed him summarily to wash his hands before dinner. "Don't think of dressing," she said; and Innocent was left alone with them. She *sat quite passive,* as she had done with Mrs. Drainham, turning her

eyes from one to the other with a wistful sort of fear, which half amused, half angered them. To be sure, in her fatigued state, there was every excuse to be made.

"You must not be afraid of us, my dear," said Mrs. Eastwood. "Nelly and I will love you very much if you will let us. It will be a great change for you, and everything is very different here from what it is in Italy. I have lived in Italy myself when your poor dear mamma was a young girl like you. Do you remember your mamma, Innocent?"

"No."

"I think you must remember her a little. You are not like her. You must be like the Vanes, I suppose. Have you ever seen any of the Vanes, your father's relations?"

"No," said Innocent, again getting bewildered, and feeling that this time she ought to say yes. Nelly came to the other side of the chair and took her hand, looking kindly at her. Why would these people say so much—do so much? Why did not they leave her alone?

"Mamma, she is stupefied with cold and fatigue," said Nelly. "To-morrow she will be quite different. Lean back in the chair, and never mind us. We will not talk to you any more."

But she did not lean back in her chair; she had not been accustomed to chairs that you could lean back in. She sat bolt upright, and looked at them with her eyes wide open, and looked at everything, taking in the picture before her with the quick eyes of a savage, though she was confused about what they said. How close and warm everything was, how shut in, no space to walk about or to see round the crowded furniture! The room, in English eyes, though very well filled, was not at all crowded with furniture; but Innocent compared it with the Palazzo Scaramucci, where every chair and table stood distinct in its own perspective. How different was the aspect of everything! the very tables were clothed, the windows draped to their feet, the room crammed with pictures, books, things, and people. Innocent seemed to want space; the walls closed and crowded upon her as they do upon people who have just recovered their sight. Mrs. Drainham's drawing-room had been made very comfortable, but it was not like this. The want of height and size struck her more than the wealth and comfort. She was not used to comfort—never having had it—and did not feel the want of it. Even the fire, after the first few minutes of revived animation produced by its warmth, felt stifling to her, as to all Italians. The ladies by her side thought she was admiring everything, which disposed them amiably towards her, but this was very far from the feeling in Innocent's mind.

And after dinner, when they took her to her room, this effect increased. She was led through Mrs. Eastwood's room and Nelly's to that little snug, bright chamber, with its bright fire blazing, the

candles burning on the toilette-table, the pretty chintz surrounding her with garlands, and the pictures on the walls which had been chosen for her pleasure. With what wonder and partial dismay she looked upon it all! It was not much larger than the great carved chest which stood in a corner of her chamber at the Palazzo Scaramucci, and yet how much had been put into it! The girl was like a savage sighing for her wigwam, and to be shut up here was terrible to her. Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly both led her to this room, explaining, poor simple souls, how they had placed her in the very heart of the house, as it were, that she might not feel lonely. "Both of us, you see, are within call, my dear," said Mrs. Eastwood, "but the room is very small."

"Yes," said Innocent. They had, no doubt, expected her to say in answer to this that the room was delightful, and to show her sense of their kindness by some word of pleasure or admiration. But nothing of the kind followed. She looked vacantly round, with a scared, half-stupefied expression. She had no desire to be put into the heart of the house. And there can be no doubt that this absolute want of all effusion, all response even on her part, chilled the warm hearts of her relations. "She is tired," they said to each other, excusing her; but that was an imperfect kind of satisfaction. Nelly herself had meant to stay with her to help her to undress. "But perhaps you would rather be alone?" said Nelly.

"Yes," was Innocent's answer; and you may imagine how discomfited poor Nelly felt, who was used to the gregarious way of girls, and did not understand what this could mean.

"I will leave you, then," she said, so completely taken aback that her self-possession failed her. She turned to go away, blushing and disturbed, feeling herself an unwelcome intruder in the room which she had spent so much care upon. Nelly did not know what to make of it. She had never encountered anything like it in her life, and it puzzled her beyond expression.

"I am here, Miss Ellinor," said the voice of old Alice behind her, which startled Nelly once more; for Alice had disapproved of all the fuss about Innocent's arrival, and had done everything she could to discourage it. "I'll put her to her bed," said Alice. "It's me that am the proper person. Go to your mamma, my dear, and I'll come and tell you when she's comfortable. She canna be expected to be pleasant to-night, for she's tired, and all's new to her. I've done the same for her mother many a day. Leave her to me."

Innocent took no part in the discussion. She stood in the centre of the little room, longing to be alone. Oh, if they would only go away and leave her to herself! "I never have a maid," she exerted herself to say, when she saw that the tall old woman remained in the room; "I do not want anything. Please go *away.*"

"Maybe it's me that wants something," said Alice, authoritatively, and began her ministrations at once, paying very little attention to the girl's reluctance. "Hair clipped short, like a boy's —that's her outlandish breeding," said Alice to herself. "A wild look, like a bit sauvage out of the woods—that's loneliness; and two great glowering een. But no like her mother—no like her mother, the Lord be thanked!"

Then this homely old woman said two or three words, somewhat stiffly and foreignly, in Italian, which made Innocent stare, and roused her up at once. She had no enthusiasm for the country in which she had lived all her life; but still, she had lived there, and the sound of the familiar tongue woke her up out of her stupor. "Are you not English," she said, "like all the rest?"

"God be thanked, no, I'm no English," said Alice, "but I'm Scotch, and it's no likely that you would ken the difference. I used to be with your mother when she was young like you. I was in Pisa with the family, where you've come from. I have never forgotten it. Do you mind your mother? Turn your head round, like a good bairn, that I may untie this ribbon about your neck."

"Why do you all ask me about my mother?" said Innocent, in a pettish tone. "No, I never knew her; why should I? The lady down-stairs asked me too."

"Because she was your mother's sister, and I was your mother's woman," said Alice. "I'm much feared, my honey, that you've no heart. Neither had your mother before you. Do you mean aye to call my mistress 'the lady down-stairs'?"

"I don't know," said Innocent, in dull stupor. She felt disposed to cry, but could not tell why she had this inclination. "What should I call her? No one ever told me her name," she added, after a moment's pause.

"This will be a bonnie handful," said Alice to herself, reflectively. "Did Mr. Frederick never tell you she was your aunt? But maybe you do not ken what that means? She's your nearest kin now you've lost that ill man, your father. She's the one that will take care of you and help you, if you're good to her—or whether or no," Alice added, under her breath.

"Take care of me? *He* promised to take care of me," said Innocent, with her eyes lightening up; "I do not want any one else."

"'He,' meaning your cousin?" said Alice grimly.

"Frederick. I like his name. I cannot remember the other names. I never have been used to see so many people," said Innocent, at length bursting into speech after her long silence. She could speak to this woman, who was a servant, but she did not understand the ladies in their pretty dresses, who oppressed her with their kindness. "Shall I have to see them every day?" she continued, with a dismal tone in her voice. The corners of her mouth drooped. At this thought she was ready to cry again.

"Go to your bed," said Alice authoritatively. "If I thought you knew what you were saying, my bonnie woman, I would like to put you to the door. The creature's no a changeling, for it says its prayers," she added to herself, when she had extinguished the candles, and left the stranger in her chamber; "but here's a bonnie handful for the mistress," Alice went on, talking to herself while she arranged Mrs. Eastwood's room for the night, "and plenty of mischief begun already. She's no like her mother, which is a comfort: but there's ane that is."

Nobody heard these oracular mutterings, however, and nobody in the house knew as much as Alice did, who had no thought in the world but the Eastwoods, and kept her mental life up by diligently putting one thing to another, and keeping watch and ward over the children she had nursed. It was common in the Elms to say that Alice was "a character;" but I do not think any of them had the least idea how distinct and marked her character was, or how deeply aware she was of the various currents which were shaping unconsciously the life of the "family." She was nearly ten years older than Mrs. Eastwood, and had brought her up as well as her daughter, commencing life as a nursery-maid in the house of her present mistress's father, when Mrs. Eastwood was six or seven years old, and her young attendant sixteen. She knew everything, and more than everything, that had taken place in the family since; more than everything, for Alice in her private musings had thought out the mingled story, and divined everybody's motives, as, perhaps, they scarcely divined them themselves. She had married, when she was thirty, the gardener who took charge of a shooting-box in Scotland, which belonged to Admiral Forbes, the Eastwoods' grandfather, but had been absent from them only about two years, returning at her husband's death to accompany them to Italy, and to settle down afterwards into the personal attendant and superintendent of her young lady's married life. She knew all about them; she knew how it was that the old Admiral had made his second marriage, and how his second daughter, Isabel, had developed by the side of her more innocent and simple sister. She recollected a great deal more about Innocent's father and mother than Mrs. Eastwood herself did—more than it was at all expedient or profitable to recollect. And it was not only the past that occupied her mind; she understood the present, and studied it with a ceaseless interest, which the subjects of her study were scarcely aware of; though they had all long ago consented to the fact that Alice knew everything. Mrs. Eastwood thought it right to inform Alice of all the greater events that affected the family, but generally ended such confidences abruptly, with a half-amused, half-angry consciousness that Alice already knew all about them, and more of them than she *herself did.* Alice was the only one in all the house who had *divined the real character* of Frederick. As for the others, she said

to herself, with affectionate contempt, that they were "Just nothing, just nothing—honest lads and lasses, with no harm in them." She loved them, but dismissed them summarily from her mind as persons not likely to supply her life with any striking interest; but here was something very different. Life quickened for the observant old woman, and a certain thrill of excitement came into her mind as she put out Mrs. Eastwood's comfortable dressing-gown and arranged all her "things." Mrs. Eastwood herself had furnished but little mental excitement to Alice, but something worth looking into seemed now about to come.

Down-stairs, the two ladies looked at each other doubtfully when Nelly went back to the drawing-room. They did not know what to say. Dick was shut up in his own room at work, or pretending to be at work, and Frederick had gone out into the garden to smoke his cigar, though the night was dark and cold. "Well, Nelly?" said Mrs. Eastwood to Nelly; and "Well, mamma?" Nelly replied.

"I do not understand the girl," was Mrs. Eastwood's next speech.

"How could we expect to understand her, just come off a long journey, and stupefied by coming into a strange place? Remember, she never saw any of us before. Don't let us be unreasonable, mamma," cried Nelly; and then she added, in a more subdued tone, "She must be affectionate, for she seemed to cling so to Frederick."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Eastwood, with a long-drawn breath. "My dear," she added, after a pause, "I don't want to anticipate difficulties which may never come; but on the whole it might have been better to send some one else than Frederick. A young man, you know; it is always a risk. I wish I had made up my mind at once to spare Alice——"

"Nonsense, mamma!"

"It is all very well to say nonsense, Nelly, but when you have lived as long as I have——" Mrs. Eastwood said slowly: "However, it cannot be helped now. Do you think she is pretty, Nelly? It's rather a remarkable face."

"I don't know," said Nelly, puzzled. "It would be beautiful in a picture. Wait till she wakes up and comes to life, and then we shall know. Here is Frederick, all perfumed with his cigar. We were talking her over——"

"Yes, I knew you must be pulling the poor child to pieces," said Frederick, seating himself by the fire. "What have you got to say against her? She is not cut in the common fashion, like all the other girls whom one sees about—and is sick of."

"I should think the other girls cared very little whether you were sick of them or not," retorted Nelly, affronted.

Mr. Frederick Eastwood was one of the young men who entertain a contempt for women, founded on the incontestable consciousness

of their own superiority; and it was one of his theories that all women were jealous of each other. Even his mother, he felt, would "pull" the new comer "to pieces," out of pure feminine spite.

"Hush, children," said Mrs. Eastwood; "we have nothing to do with other girls for the moment. This one is very unresponsive, I am afraid. You have seen more of her than we have, Frederick. Had she any friends out yonder? Did she seem to you affectionate?"

Frederick laughed. "I have no reason to complain of any want of affectionateness," he said, pulling his peaked beard with that supreme satisfaction of gratified vanity which no woman can tolerate. Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly looked at each other with a common wrath, but the mother put up a finger to suppress the impatience of her child.

"Yes, she seemed to turn to you," she said, with as much indifference in her voice as was practicable. "Ring for tea now, Nelly. Frederick will like to get up-stairs early after his journey. I saw Mr. Bellingham at the office after I got your letter, Frederick. He made rather a joke of your illness, poor boy. I hope you will not wish to go away for some time again. I am told that, though promotion is by seniority, those young men who are most to be depended on are the ones who get secretaryships, and so forth—and you know your income, my dear boy, is but small——"

"Those who get secretaryships, and so forth, are those who have private influence," said Frederick loftily, "which is not my case, mother. Whoever told you so told you stuff and nonsense. Men in office take their own sons and nephews, or their friends' sons and nephews, for their private secretaries—and fellows like me have no chance."

"But Mr. Bellingham, I am sure, had no private influence," urged Mrs. Eastwood; "it must have been merit in his case——"

"There was some political reason, I suppose," said Frederick. "Merit is humbug, you may take my word for that. By-the-bye, I think I will just step out to the club for half an hour to see what is going on. It is rather a fine night——"

"But after your illness, Frederick——"

"Oh, I am all right," he said, going out of the room. If I am obliged to tell the truth, I must say that I do not think his departure was any great loss to his mother and sister. Mrs. Eastwood sighed, half because it was the first night of his return, and she felt the slight of his speedy withdrawal, and half because of an old prejudice in her mind that it was best for young men when not engaged to spend their evenings at home. But Frederick never made himself at all delightful at home, after an absence like this, for reasons of which she was altogether unconscious. Nelly did not sigh at all, and if she felt her brother's departure, did so more in anger than in

"Are all young men coxcombs like that, I wonder?" she said.

"Hush, Nelly, you are always hard upon Frederick. Most of them are disposed that way, I am afraid; and not much wonder either when girls flatter their vanity. We must teach Innocent not to be so demonstrative," said Mrs. Eastwood. She sighed again, remembering her friend's warning. "Perhaps Jane Everard was not so much in the wrong, Nelly, after all."

"I suppose people who take the worst view of everything and everybody must be in the right sometimes," said Nelly indignantly —a saying in which there was more truth than she thought.

CHAPTER XII.

A LOVE TALE.

I AM obliged at this moment to interrupt the history of Innocent's entrance into English life by the intrusion of another event which occurred quite suddenly, and without adequate preparation, a few days after the arrival of the traveller, and which threw Innocent for the moment altogether into the shade. It was not a deeply premeditated event, as perhaps it ought to have been, aiming as it did at such very important results, and affecting two lives in so momentous a way. On this particular afternoon there had been a flood of visitors at the Elms, such as now and then occurs without rhyme or reason—every acquaintance the Eastwoods possessed seeming to be moved by a unanimous impulse. From two o'clock until five the callers kept pouring in. On ordinary occasions one or two a day kept the house lively; this was one of those accidental floods which obey, as philosophers tell us, some fantastic law of their own, like the number of undirected letters put into the post-office. Two gentlemen arrived among the latest, both of whom had hoped to find the ladies alone, and who grinned and shook hands with each other, and told each other the news with the most delightful amiability, though their internal emotions were less sweet. They arrived together, and as the room was still tolerably full, they became each other's companions, and stood in a corner talking with the most confidential aspect, after they had shaken hands with Mrs. Eastwood. Nelly was at the other extremity of the room, at the door-window which opened into the conservatory, talking to Sir Alexis Longueville, a man with a rent-roll as long as his name, whom both the gentlemen I have mentioned regarded with unfavourable feelings.

"What do you suppose people see in that old ass, Molyneux," said Major Railton, "that everybody kootoos to him?"

"His money," said Molyneux sententiously; and for ten minutes more these gentlemen crushed Sir Alexis under their heels as it were, and ground him into powder, though no feminine spite could be involved in their proceedings. He was not an old ass. He was a cynical middle-aged man of the world, who, notwithstanding his romantic name, had sustained a great many prosaic batterings and fierce encounters with the world. He had come to his fortune after his youth was over, and after he had learned to think badly enough of most people about him, an opinion which was not altered by the great social success he had when he reappeared as Sir Alexis, after a somewhat obscure and not much respected career as Colonel Longueville. It was now generally understood that this hero, the worse for the wear, was disposed to marry, and indeed was on the outlook for a suitable person to become Lady Longueville; a fact which his kind but vulgar sister Mrs. Barclay, who had married a millionaire, made known wherever she was received. He was "looking for a wife." Major Railton and Mr. Molyneux in their corner were both aware of this fact, and both of them were extremely bitter upon Mrs. Eastwood for allowing him, as she did quite placidly, to stand talking to Nelly "for hours," as Mr. Molyneux expressed it afterwards.

"What a pity that the best of women should be so mercenary!" he said to his companion.

"They will give anything for a handle to their names," said the misanthropical Major, stroking his moustache, with discomfiture in his countenance. He had come with an estimate in his pocket for the work that had to be done at the stables, and had calculated on an hour at least of confidential talk.

And Nelly stood and talked to Sir Alexis, pointing out to him quite eagerly the different flowers that thrust their pretty heads against the glass, peering into the room. He knew about flowers. This innocent taste reigned strangely in his cynical bosom among many other inclinations much less praiseworthy. He laughed with Nelly over their Latin names, and told her stories about them and about his conservatories at Longueville. Perhaps he was not aware of the reckless way in which he was laying himself open to the remarks of the young men in the room, who did not leave him a shred of reputation to cover him, as they stood behind snarling to each other, and united in a common enmity. He was more amusing than either of them, and though he had no particular designs upon Nelly, he liked her fresh young face, and her interest in all that he said. Perhaps, too, a man who is aware of all the advantages of the youth which he has outlived, has a pleasure in proving himself more entertaining than younger men. He detained Nelly, and Nelly was not unwilling to be detained. She had perceived the entrance of the two at the end of the room, and rather, I fear, en*joyed their gloomy looks*; or rather, she thought nothing whatever

about Major Railton, but was guiltily glad to see the gloom on the countenance of young Molyneux.

"It will teach him to be full five days without calling," she said to herself. She had not acknowledged even to herself that she was in love with young Molyneux, but she had an inward conviction that he was in love with her, and on the whole liked him for it. Is it not always a sign of good taste at least? Therefore she stood and talked to Sir Alexis, looking up brightly in his face, till he, who had no designs that way, was half subjugated, and asked himself suddenly whether Nelly Eastwood would not do? which was going a very long way. Time, however, and Mrs. Barclay's horses, could not wait for ever, and at last the baronet was borne away.

"Come to me soon, Nelly dear, and finish what you have begun," said that lady, whispering in her ear, as she took leave. Finish what she had begun! Nelly had no idea what she could mean.

By this time most of the visitors were gone, and Nelly, after a few minutes' talk with the pair at the other end of the room, proceeded to execute some business which she had been kept from doing before. "I am sure Major Railton and Mr. Molyneux will excuse me," she said, "but I must get my primroses now before any one else comes in——"

"I don't think you will find any," said Mrs. Eastwood, making her a sign to stay. But it was getting dark, and Nelly, who was perverse, pretended not to understand. Any pleasure she might have in the society of one of the two was neutralized by the presence of both, and perhaps there was even a thought in her mind that a young lover might take heart of grace and follow. In the conservatory her white-furred jacket and little flower-basket were lying on a chair. Before she could throw on the wrap Molyneux had joined her. "I think Railton has some business to talk about," he said aloud, with a slight nod of concealed triumph to his adversary; "May I come upon the flower-gathering expedition? Gathering flowers by moonlight has quite a poetical sound."

"It is too cold to be poetical," said Nelly. There had been just enough between this girl and boy to give them both a thrill of the heart when they went, out of sight and hearing, into the stillness of the garden, where, indeed, to tell the truth, few primroses were as yet to be found. It was one of those lovely nights of early spring which sometimes succeed a boisterous day. The wind had fallen with the evening. The sky in the west was still full of colour, a pink flush extending far into the blue. The gorgeous sunset clouds had broken up, but this great rose-tinted pavilion still stood, spreading out its film of lovely colour over the house. On the garden side there was a stretch of clear sky, untinged by this dispersing veil of glory; clear, somewhat cold, pale, and luminous, with one star set in the midst of it; and separated from this blue bit of heaven by billows of fleecy cloud, a soft, clear young moon in her first quarter.

It was cold, but to think of cold was impossible with such a heaven above them—impossible, at least, for these two, who were young, and who were together. They went along under the trees for some time without saying anything, except a little exclamation about the beauty of the sky.

"I am tired," said Nelly at length; "I am so glad it is over. Calls are the stupidest of all things. If people would come in in the evening, as they do abroad—but English people will never understand."

"Your visitors were not all stupid, I think," said Molyneux, warming with the heat of combat.

"Oh no; Sir Alexis, for instance, was very amusing," said Nelly, feeling by instinct what was coming, and defying her fate.

"You seemed to think so," said the young man, with the loftiest tone of disinterested comment.

"And indeed I did think so; he is excellent company," said the girl.

Thus the first parallels of warfare were opened. The pair went on quite beyond the bit of lawn where the primroses grew, and the red in the west stretched out as if to cover them, and the moon in the east looked down as if it were hanging over some battlement of heaven to watch. Nelly's delicate nostrils had dilated a little with a sense of coming battle, and as for Molyneux, he held his head high like a war-horse.

"Yes, I am aware that ladies take that view sometimes; he is not popular among men," he said, with lofty calm.

"I suppose men are jealous of him," said Nelly. "Oh dear, yes, men are very jealous of each other. If you think a girl can have been out two seasons without perceiving that——"

"I am sorry we should have given you such a bad opinion of us. I am at a loss to understand," said Mr. Molyneux solemnly, "what kind of creature the man could be who would be jealous of an old *roué* like Longueville. His character is too well known among men, I assure you, Miss Eastwood, to make any such feeling possible."

Nelly coloured with pride and shame. "He ought to have a label on him, then, to warn the ignorant. Not knowing what his crimes are, I cannot judge him; he is very amusing, that is all I know."

"And that, of course, makes up for everything; and when any one ventures to warn you, Miss Eastwood, instead of listening, you turn your displeasure against the unfortunate man who feels it on his conscience——"

"Mr. Molyneux," cried Nelly, quickly interrupting him, "I don't know what right one gentleman, whom mamma knows, has to warn me against another. Mamma is the person to be spoken to if there s really anything to say."

Thus the quarrel flashed and fizzed to the point of explosion; and *what would have happened*—whether they would have been driven

apart in fragments, and their budding romance blown into dust and ruin in the ordinary course of events, had Molyneux responded in the same tone, I cannot say; but there are resources at the command of lovers which are not open to the general public. He did not go on in the same tone. He became suddenly lachrymose, as young men in love are permitted to be on occasion.

"Miss Eastwood," he said dolefully, "there have been times when I have ventured to think that you would not quite place me on the same level with the last new-comer——"

"Oh, no," said Nelly, with compunction, "I beg your pardon, that was not what I meant. We have known you a long time, Mr. Molyneux, and I am sure have always looked upon you as—a friend."

"Well, as—a friend," he said, in the same pathetic tone, "might I not be allowed to say something when I saw that you were being deceived? Dear Miss Eastwood, could I stand by, do you think, knowing all I do of you, and see a man making his way into your esteem under false pretences?"

"Making his way into my esteem?" cried Nelly with frank laughter. "Please don't be so solemn. You can't think surely for a moment that I *cared* for that old Sir Alexis!"

"You are quite sure you don't?" cried the lover, brightening up.

"Sure! Now didn't I say it was all jealousy?" cried Nelly, laughing; but when she had said the words she perceived the meaning they might bear, and blushed violently, and stopped short, as people in embarrassing circumstances constantly do.

"You are quite right, as you always are," said Molyneux, stopping too, and putting himself directly in front of her. If it were not that the women who are being proposed to are generally too much agitated to perceive it, a man about to propose has many very funny aspects. Young Molyneux placed himself directly in Nelly's way; he stood over her, making her withdraw a step in self-defence. His face became long, and his eyes large. He put out his hands to take hers, if he could have got them. "Yes, you are right," he said, more lachrymose than ever; "you are always right. I should be jealous of an angel if he came too near you. I am jealous of everybody. Won't you say something? Won't you give me your hand? I don't care for anything in the world but you, or without you."

"Mr. Molyneux!" cried Nelly, drawing a little back, with her heart beating and her cheeks burning, in the soft, starry twilight. He had got her hands somehow, in spite of her, and was advancing closer and closer. How unforeseen and unintended it all was! Neither of them had meant anything half-an-hour ago of this tremendous character. But Molyneux by this time felt sure that his life depended upon it, and that he had thought of nothing else for ages; and Nelly's heart beat so loud that she thought it must be

heard half a mile off, and feared it would leap away from her altogether. Their voices grew lower and lower, their shadows more confused in the young moonlight, which made at the most but a faint outline of shadow. There grew to be at last only a murmur under the bare branches, all knotted with the buds of spring, and only one blot of shade upon the path, which was softly whitened by that poetic light. This happened in the Lady's Walk, which was on the other side of the lawn from the elm-trees, narrower, and quite arched and overshadowed with branches. The pink had scarcely gone out of the sky overhead, and the one star was still shining serenely in its luminous opening, when the whole business was over. You might have been in the garden without seeing, and, certainly, without hearing; but then matters were delightfully arranged for such interviews in the leafy demesne of The Elms.

"Oh, dear! I have forgotten my primroses," said Nelly, "and what will they think of us in-doors?"

"Never mind; Railton has been very busy talking to your mother about bricks and slates," said Molyneux, with a laugh of irrepressible triumph. They both laughed, which was mean of Nelly.

"Oh, hush! What has poor Major Railton to do with it?" she said. She was leaning against a lime-tree, a spot which she always remembered. It was cold, but neither of them felt it. Nelly's little toes were half frozen, and she did not mind.

"Look! all the sunset is dying away," said Molyneux. "It would not go, Nelly, till it knew how things were going to turn out. 'Go not, happy day, from the shining fields——'"

"Don't talk nonsense—you should say, from the sodden lawn," said Nelly. "Let us get the primroses now, or what can I say to mamma?"

"We shall both have a great deal to say to her. She will never once think of the primroses, Nelly."

"Oh, don't call me 'Nelly' so loud; some one will hear you. Must we go and tell directly?" said the girl, with a half-whimper, which the foolish young man thought celestial. This to be said by Nelly, a girl who had never in all her life kept a secret half an hour from her mother! The fact was that she wanted to have the telling herself, and quaked at the thought of presenting this ardent personage to her mother, and probably having her dignity compromised before that mother's very eyes by "some of his nonsense." Nelly was very shy, and half ashamed of coming into the light and looking even her wooer himself in the face.

There were but a very few primroses, and these were half frozen, cowering among their leaves. Young Molyneux carried away a *little* cluster of them, and gave another to Nelly, which was not *placed in her basket,* and then they made another final round of

the garden, and walked down the elm-tree avenue solemnly arm in arm. How quickly the mind gets accustomed to any revolution! This little concluding processional march threw them years in advance of the more agitating contiguity of the Lady's Walk.

"This is how we shall walk about everywhere ten years hence, when we are sober old married people," he said; and there glanced over the imaginations of both a sudden picture, which both would have been sadly disconcerted to have described. A little tremulous laugh went from one to the other. How much emotion that cannot express itself otherwise has vent in such soft laughter? And a sense of the calm of happiness to come, so different from this delightful dream of the beginning, yet issuing naturally from it, stole over them and stilled their young hearts.

This was what was going on in the garden while Major Railton, not without many a horrible thought of his rival's advantages, was talking bricks and slates, as Molyneux flippantly said, to Mrs. Eastwood. They had come to the length of a pipe and water-butt for the rain-water, and the plumber's estimate, when Nelly and Molyneux were gathering the primroses. How the gallant Major's heart was being torn asunder in the midst of those discussions, I dare not attempt to describe. He had seated himself so that he could see into the garden; but the flicker of the firelight filled the room, and the Lady's Walk was invisible from the windows.

"Don't you think Miss Eastwood will catch cold? There is an east wind, I fear," he said, in the very midst of the discussion about the plumber.

"I told Nelly to wrap herself up," said Mrs. Eastwood, calmly. She was not afraid of the east wind. The Eastwoods had never been known to have any delicacy about the chest. And as for a more serious danger Nelly's mother, secure in full possession of her child, had not even begun to think of that.

She was scarcely alarmed even when the two entered somewhat flushed and embarrassed, as soon as Major Railton, who, poor man, had an engagement, had withdrawn breathing fire and flame.

"What a colour you have, Nelly," said Mrs. Eastwood innocently. "I suppose it is the wind. The Major tells me the wind is in the east. You should not have stayed out so long. Come to the fire and warm yourselves, both of you. I see you have got no primroses after all."

"There were none," said Nelly guiltily, putting her hand over the little cluster in her belt. "It is too cold for them; but I don't think I ever was out on such a lovely night."

"You have no idea how beautiful it is," said young Molyneux—and then he took his leave in the most embarrassed way. When he clutched one of her hands and held it fast, and groped in the dark for the other, Nelly thanked heaven in mingled fright and gratitude that she had put a stop to his intention of at once telling

her mother. What might he not have done before Mrs. Eastwood's very eyes?

"But Nelly," said the mother, when he was gone, "you should not have stayed so long out of doors. I don't want to be absurd, or to put things into your head; but Ernest Molyneux is quite a young man, and very nice-looking, and just the sort of person to have stories made up about him—and really what object you could both have, wandering about on a cold night, except chatter and nonsense——"

Nelly was kneeling before the fire, warming her cold little fingers. At this address she sidled up to her mother's side, and put her flushed cheek down on Mrs. Eastwood's silken lap, and began with the most coaxing and melting of voices,—

"Mamma!"

It is not to be wondered at if an event like this happening quite suddenly and unexpectedly in an innocent young house which had not yet begun to afflict itself with love-stories should for the moment have eclipsed everything, and put the strange inmate and all the circumstances of her first appearance at once into the shade.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONSULTATIONS.

THE commotion produced in The Elms by the above event was very great. It was the first experience of the family in this kind of thing, and it affected everybody, from Mrs. Eastwood down to the kitchen-maid. Frederick was perhaps the least moved of all. He intimated it as his opinion that Molyneux was all right, seeing that he had a father before him; that he wondered at Nelly's taste, but supposed it was her own look-out, and if she was pleased no one had any right to interfere. He made this speech rather disagreeable to his sister from the little shrug of the shoulders with which he announced his surprise at her taste; but otherwise he was friendly enough. Dick, for his part, said little, but he walked round her with a certain serious investigation in the intervals of his studies.

"You look exactly as you did yesterday; I can't see any difference," said Dick. "Why don't you put on another kind of gown, or pin Molyneux's card on you, to show you are disposed of?"

To this, however, Nelly paid no more attention than she did to the comments of Winks, who came and wagged his tail at her in a knowing, good-humoured sort of way. When Molyneux came to *see Mrs. Eastwood next* morning, Winks met him at the door,

escorted him to the dining-room, where he was to have his audience, and then trotted in on three legs to where Nelly was sitting, and wagged his tail confidentially. "A very good fellow, on the whole, I assure you," he said as plainly as could be said by that medium of communication.

Nelly did not sit in awful suspense while her lover was unfolding himself to her mother. She knew that mother well enough to be sure that nothing untoward would come in the course of her true love. But she awaited their coming with a certain importance and expectation. They had a long conversation in the dining-room, longer perhaps than Nelly approved. Mr. Molyneux had a great deal to say to Mrs. Eastwood. No one could be less disposed to "repent at leisure" after the hot haste of his declaration, but yet it is very probable, had he had time to think, that he would have decided on the prudence of waiting longer. When it occurred to him that he must tell Mrs. Eastwood that he was earning nothing, but lived on the allowance his father gave him, it made the young man uncomfortably hot and nervous. He avoided the mother's eye as he told this part of the story, dwelling much upon what he would do in the future, and his eagerness to provide for Nelly "all the comforts she had been used to." Mrs. Eastwood, though she was not a woman of business, knew enough about the world to shake her head at this. She was very well inclined to Molyneux, both for his own sake and for Nelly's. He was good-looking, well-mannered, and always nicely behaved to herself, which naturally has a certain influence upon a mother. And his connexions were all that could be wished. Mr. Molyneux, Q.C., who was recognized by everybody as going to be Mr. Justice Molyneux at the very first vacancy, was perfectly satisfactory as a father-in-law for Nelly, and would secure for Nelly's family a comfortable certainty of being well lawyered all their lives. And they were "nice people;" there was, on the whole, nothing in the world to be said against Mrs. Molyneux, Ernest's mother, or the Misses Molyneux, his sisters. But nevertheless, as it is strictly necessary for a young couple to have something to live on, Mrs. Eastwood shook her head.

"Nelly has five thousand pounds," she said, "but with my boys to place out in the world, I shall not be able to give her any more, and that is not much to depend upon. And, as a matter of principle, I don't like to see young people depending upon allowances from their fathers and mothers—unless it might be an eldest son, with landed property coming to him. I don't think it is the right way."

Molyneux was rather surprised at this display of wisdom. He thought some one must have put it into her head. He had meant to slur over his want of income in his interview with the mother, as he could not have done with a father. And then Mrs. Eastwood was so "jolly," so good-natured, and kind that he did not expect

his position to be regarded as involving any want of principle. It must not be supposed, however, that the young man had any intention of deceiving, or that he was aware of having done wrong in obeying his impulse, and hastening by so many weeks or months his explanation with Nelly. Yet he felt that but for that overwhelming impulse it might have been prudent to have postponed the explanation; and now he received a sudden check, and for a moment experienced the sensations of a man who has been proceeding on false pretences, and did not know what to say.

"I am afraid you will think I have been premature," he said. "The fact is, I should have made my way first before I ventured—but then, Mrs. Eastwood, you must make allowances for me, and recollect that to see Nelly often, and yet to continue quite prudent and master of myself——"

"But you need not have seen Nelly quite so often," said Mrs. Eastwood with a smile.

"Supposing I had stayed away, what should you have thought of me? That I was a despicable fellow, laying myself out to please her, and then running away when I thought I had gone too far."

"I don't think I should have thought anything of the kind," said Mrs. Eastwood, in that easy way which is so disconcerting to people who feel that the eyes of the world ought to be upon them. "I should have thought you were occupied, or had other engagements. Indeed, until Nelly told me last night, I never had distinctly identified you as being fond of her, Mr. Molyneux. No doubt it was my stupidity, but I should not have remarked it; I don't know whether she might have done so."

Molyneux felt considerably crushed by this calm and tolerant judgment, but he went on,—

"You may be sure this state of things won't last," he said; "I have a motive now, and I shall set to work. Of course I cannot press for an early marriage, as I should otherwise have done had I been wise, and made my preparations first——"

"No, of course not," said Mrs. Eastwood. This gave her great pleasure, practically, but theoretically I am obliged to confess that she half despised her future son-in-law for his philosophy. It was quite right, and relieved her mind from a load. But still a woman likes her child to be wooed hotly, and prefers an impatient lover, unwilling to wait. Such a one she would have talked to, and reasoned down into patience, but, theoretically, she would have liked him the best.

"You will not oppose me?" said Molyneux, taking her hand; "you will be a good mother to me, and let me see Nelly, and be a sort of new son, to make up to me for having to wait? You are always good, to everybody—you won't keep *me* at arm's length?"

"*No,*" *said Mrs. Eastwood,* "I won't keep you at arm's length,

for that would be to punish Nelly; but I think you should not have spoken till your prospects were a little more clear."

"They are clear enough," said the anxious lover. "It is only that I have been idle, and wanted energy; but now no man can have a stronger motive——"

Mrs. Eastwood shook her head again, but she smiled likewise, and gave him her hand, and even permitted a filial salute, which reddened her comely cheek, and softened her heart to Nelly's betrothed. Perhaps, under the circumstances, it was permissible for a man to be imprudent. Molyneux spent the rest of the day in and about The Elms, appearing and disappearing, hanging about Nelly, disturbing all the household arrangements, and communicating to the visitors premature information as to what had happened. Not that he made any confidences, but that his mere presence there all the afternoon, his look of possession and triumph, the little air of being at home, which the young man could not resist taking upon himself, told the tale more clearly than words. Mrs. Barclay ran in "just for a moment," as she said, to beg Nelly to go with her next day to a horticultural show, and "finish what you have begun, you little puss," she whispered in the girl's ear. "What have I begun?" Nelly asked, bewildered, while Molyneux, without any assignable reason, was so rude as to burst out laughing in his enjoyment of the joke. He put Mrs. Barclay into her carriage as if he had been the son of the house, she said afterwards, a proceeding which sent her away with a certain vague disquiet and resentment, though of course, as she allowed, she had no right to interfere. Major Railton, too, when he called about the plumber's work, was infinitely disgusted to find Molyneux there, and to leave him there, when, after long waiting, he was obliged to relinquish the hope of out-staying his rival. "I must go," he said at length, in tart and ill-tempered tones, "for alas! I am not so lucky as you young fellows with nothing to do. I have my duties to attend to." This was a poisoned arrow, and struck the whole happy group, mother, daughter, and lover, with equal force.

"I am sure, Major Railton, you are an example to us all," said Mrs. Eastwood; "always so ready to serve others, and yet with so much of your own work to do. But I hope Mr. Molyneux has his duties too."

"Yes, I have my duties," said the lover, in his insolent happiness turning a beaming countenance upon the unsuccessful one. It was growing dark, and he was so impertinent as to give a little twitch to Nelly's sleeve in the obscurity, under Major Railton's very eyes; who did not, indeed, see this flaunting in his face of his adversary's banner, but felt that there was some bond unrevealed which joined the three before him in a common cause. He went away in a state of irritation for which he could not have given any just reason, and tore the plumber's estimate to pieces when he emerged from the

shrubbery in front of The Elms. Mrs. Eastwood had not taken kindly even to his plumber. She had stood by a certain old Sclater, an old jobbing Scotsman, for whom she had a national partiality.

"Why should I bother myself about their concerns? Let them get Molyneux to look after things," the Major said to himself, with scorn that transcended all other expression; and he laughed what is sometimes described in literature as a "hollow laugh" of bitterness and sarcasm.

Indeed, I think Major Railton was right, and that Molyneux's supervision of the roofs and water-butts would have come to very little good.

It had been resolved in the family that nothing was to be said about the engagement for the present, as it would in all probability be a long one; and this was how they began to carry out their resolution. I do not need to add that the servants knew it the first evening, and had already settled where the young people were to live, and what sort of an establishment they would keep up. Winks, too, was aware of the fact from the first, and, as I have said, was confidentially humorous about it with Nelly, and kept up her courage during the interview between her mother and her lover. But notwithstanding all we have been hearing lately about the communications made by dogs to their friends, I do not think he spread the news out of doors, or if he did whisper it to a crony, that crony was discreet.

On Saturday, which was the day following, Jenny came up from Eton to spend the Sunday with his adoring family. Jenny was extremely unlike his name—a big and bony boy of sixteen, promising to be the biggest of the family, though neither Frederick nor Dick were short. He had big joints and long limbs, and red wrists and prodigious knuckles projecting from the short sleeve of his coat. But notwithstanding so many appearances against him, he was the most intellectual of Mrs. Eastwood's sons—a "sap" at school, and addicted to reading away from school, a fashion of Eton boy with which the world is not familiar. By way of making up for this, he was somewhat rough in his manners, and great in such exercises as demanded strength rather than skill. He was tremendous at football, though no one gave him the credit for clever play; and though his "form" was bad, and precluded all hope of "the boats," he could carry a skiff along at a pace which no one could keep up with, and against the stream was the greatest oar of his years afloat on the Thames. In consideration of these qualifications the youth of Eton graciously looked over his "sapping," or rather were vaguely impressed by it—as, to do him justice, the modern schoolboy generally is when intellectual power is combined with the muscular force, of which he has a clearer understanding. Jenny was not yet a "swell," but he was in a fair way for being a swell—a title which

at Eton bears a very different meaning from its meaning elsewhere. But he was very good to his family when he went home, and tolerant of their ignorance. Jenny's name in the school list was all starred and ribboned, so to speak, with unknown orders of merit, such as the profane eye comprehends not. He had a big Roman letter before his name, and a little Greek one after it, and a double number after that—mystic signs of honours which the Eton man understands, but which I will not attempt to explain. It might have been confusing to a more mature intellect to contemplate all the novelties which were to dawn upon him on this visit; but Jenny was not emotional. He shook hands with his brother-in-law who was to be, with extreme composure.

"I suppose they have told you," said Mr. Molyneux, good-humouredly permitting himself to be inspected by this big boy.

"Yes, they have told me," said Jenny, "but I knew you before."

"You did not know me in my present capacity. Indeed, I am not generally known in my present capacity," said Molyneux; "and I don't quite see why you should have been told. You would never have found out."

"Oh, shouldn't I!" said Jenny. "Last time I was at home, I said, 'He's going to be Mr. Nelly, that fellow;' didn't I, mamma? Of course you are Mr. Nelly. Women don't get half justice in this world. I like her better than you, as a matter of course; so that's your distinction to me."

"Jenny goes in for Women's Rights," said his mother, with a smile.

"Of course I do; I'm a woman's son; oughtn't I to stand up for them? If you mean to tell me old Brownlow there has more sense than my mother, I tell you you're a fool, that's all. Nor Frederick hasn't—not half so much—though he thinks himself such a swell," said Jenny.

In point of negatives, boys, however learned in Greek and Latin, permit themselves occasionally, in English, a style of their own.

"I don't want a vote, you silly boy," said Mrs. Eastwood; "it is not in my way."

"You may please yourself about that—but it's a disgrace to England that you shouldn't have it if you like," cried the young politician hotly. And then he sunk suddenly from this lofty elevation, and asked, "Where's the other girl?"

"Do you mean Innocent?"

"I mean her, if that's her name," said the boy, colouring slightly. "Don't she stay with the rest of us? Ain't you good to her? Where has she gone?"

"We are as good as we know how to be," said Mrs. Eastwood, glad to plunge into a grievance, and with a new listener. "We don't know what to make of her, Jenny. She does not care for Nelly *and me.* We have tried to coax her, and we have tried to

scold her; but she will stay by herself. She comes down when the bell rings, and she speaks when she is spoken to: that is all; and I am at my wit's end what to do."

"But that is everything a woman ought to be," said Molyneux. "Isn't there a proverb about being seen and not heard, &c.? What a difference from some people! When I came in to-day, the first thing I heard was some one singing up-stairs—singing so that I felt inclined to dance. I suppose it was not this Innocent?"

"It must be your fault," said Jenny seriously, taking no notice of this interpellation.

"My fault, Jenny!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, getting red; and then she paused, and subdued her tones. "Do you know, dear, I often think it must be. But what can I do?" she said humbly. "I try talking to her, and that fails; and then I try taking no notice. Yes, Jenny, I believe you are right. If I could love her heartily, right out, as I love Nelly——"

"That's unreasonable," said Jenny. "You can't do that, because, you see, we love Nelly by instinct, not for anything in her. She's not bad, for a girl—but if she were as disagreeable as an old cat, still we should have instinct to fall back upon. You have no instinct in respect to the other girl."

"What an odd boy you are!" said Mrs. Eastwood, half affronted, half laughing; "and yet I believe there's something in it. But I do blame myself. I want to be kind, very kind, to her; whereas, you know, if I had not been kind to her, but only had loved her at once, I should have done better, I am sure. As for girls being seen and not heard, I don't think it applies to their families, Mr. Molyneux. It is all very well out in the world——"

"Out in the world one would rather they did say something now and then," said Molyneux. "It may be good, but it is dull. We are in a new cycle of opinion, and don't think as our grandfathers did. At the domestic hearth it might be very nice to have some one who would only speak when she was spoken to. There would be no quarrels then, Nelly; no settings up of independent judgment; no saying 'Hold your tongue, sir——'"

"That ought to be said, however, sometimes," said Nelly, making a little *moue*.

These were the light-horse skirmishings of conversation, part of that running dialogue about everything which these two young persons carried on in every corner, over everybody's head, and through everybody's talk. The others, to tell the truth, paid very little attention to their chatter, and Jenny came in with a steady march, as of the main body of the army along the beaten road.

"The question is, has she anything to say?" said Jenny. "I *have* felt myself, sometimes, What is the good of talking? I don't *blame you for not being* fond of her, mother; for that, I suppose, *you could not help*. But she should not be left to go about like a

ghost. I don't believe in ghosts," said the youth, propping himself up against the mantelpiece ; " they are generally deceptions, or else it is quite impossible to prove them. But when I saw that girl I thought *she* was one. Her face is a face out of a picture : I saw it once at the Louvre, the year we were abroad. And she has something very queer in her eyes ; and she glides as if she had not any feet. Altogether she is queer. Don't she take to anybody in the house ?"

" She is fond of Frederick, I think," said Mrs. Eastwood, faltering. Jenny formed his lips into the appearance of " Whew ! " He was taken by surprise.

" Fond of Frederick, and not care for *them !*" he said to himself, under his breath ; this was a very curious indication of character. I am not sure that Jenny did not think, like most other human creatures, that it was possible his own attractions and influence might " bring out " Innocent. He gave her a considerable share of his attention that evening, and kept his eyes upon her. He was a theoretical sort of boy, and had read a great deal of modern poetry, and liked to think that he could analyze character like Mr. Browning. He tried to throw himself so strongly into her position that he should see the workings of her mind, and why she looked like a ghost. How Jenny succeeded in this noble pursuit of his will be seen hereafter. It occupied his mind very much all that Sunday, during which Nelly and young Molyneux were still in the ascendant, though the first novelty of their glory was beginning to fade.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW.

THE course of Nelly's true love did not, however, run so absolutely smooth as might have been supposed from this beginning. Her own family received it, as has been recorded, as a matter concerning Nelly's happiness, with little of those grave considerations about means and money which generally attend the formation of such contracts. Perhaps this might be because she had no father to consider that part of the question, though Mrs. Eastwood did her best to be businesslike. But then Mrs. Eastwood, being only a woman, believed in love, and chiefly considered Nelly's happiness —which, after all, if it were involved, was of more importance than money. The other side cared nothing about Nelly's happiness, and not very much for her lover's—it concerned itself with things much

more important, with the fact that five thousand pounds was but a small sum to pay for the honour of being daughter-in-law to Mr. Molyneux, Q.C., and that Ernest might have done better. And though Ellinor Eastwood was of better blood than the Molyneuxes, and better connexions, and really possessed something of her own, whereas her lover had nothing, his friends did not hesitate to say among themselves that Mrs. Eastwood had long had her eye upon him, that the Eastwoods had "made a dead set at him," and many other flattering expressions of the same kind, such as are liberally used in polite society whenever a young man is "caught," according to the equally polite expression, by the young woman who, of course, has been angling for him all her life long. This was the way in which the matter was regarded by Ernest's family, who were very much like other people, neither better nor worse, and took the conventional way of treating the subject. They had not a word to say against Nelly, but were convinced she "had made a dead set at him." Such is the way of the world.

A whole week passed before the Molyneuxes took any notice, and then it was announced to Mrs. Eastwood that the head of the house, the future Judge, was to call upon her before he went to his chambers in the morning. Mrs. Eastwood had been put upon her dignity by this treatment of her, and though she had allowed Ernest to come to The Elms constantly, and to dine there every evening, her manner had become day by day a little colder to him. This made Nelly unhappy, who coaxed and hung about her mother with appealing eyes.

"But you like Ernest? You are sure you like him?" she would ask ten times in a day.

"I have nothing to say against Ernest. It is his family, who are not acting as we have a right to expect of them," answered her mother; and she received with great gravity the announcement of Mr. Molyneux's intended visit. She would not allow to any one that she was excited by it, but the family breakfasted half an hour earlier on that particular morning, in order that everything might be cleared away, and the room in order for this interview. The dining-room was Mrs. Eastwood's business room, where she transacted all her more important affairs. There is something in the uncompromising character of a dining-room which suits business; the straight-backed chairs up and down, without compromising curves or softness, the severe square rectangular lines of the table, the side-board ponderous and heavy, tons of solid mahogany—even the pictures on the walls, which were all portraits, and of a gravely severe aspect—made it an appropriate state chamber for great occasions. When Mr. Molyneux was ushered in, he found Mrs. Eastwood seated on a hard chair before the table, with a large inkstand and all her housekeeping books before her. He was amused by the pose, being clever enough to perceive that it, at least, was

not quite genuine, but he lacked the power to go farther, and immediately made a vulgar estimate of her, such as vulgar-minded men invariably make of women whose youth and good looks are waning. Mr. Molyneux was a great speaker, a powerful pleader, but a vulgar-minded man notwithstanding. He was loosely made and loosely dressed, with a certain largeness and breadth about him which impressed his hearers as if it had been a moral quality —and his face was loquacious, especially the mouth, which had large lips, and lines about them bearing token of perpetual motion. These lips, and the peculiar way in which, in repose, they closed upon each other, were enough to prove to any spectator, that his powers of speech were not to be despised. It was not an eloquent mouth. There is a great difference between powerful loquacity and real eloquence. He was not eloquent. A lofty subject would have disconcerted him, and when he attempted to treat an ordinary subject in a lofty way, his grandeur became bathos, and called forth laughter when tears were intended. But he was tremendously fluent, and he was popular. He did almost what he liked with the ordinary British jury, and his name in a bad case was almost as good as a verdict of acquittal.

When this man was ushered in by Brownlow with an importance befitting the occasion, Mrs. Eastwood momentarily felt her courage fail her. She knew him but slightly, and had never come into much personal contact with him, and she had that natural respect, just touched by a little dread for him, which women often entertain for men of public eminence who have gained for themselves a prominent place in the world. Nor did he do anything to diminish her agitation. He looked at her with cool grey eyes which twinkled from the folds and layers of eyelids that surrounded them, and with a half sarcastic smile on his face; and he called her "ma'am," as he was in the habit of doing when he meant to bully a female witness. Mrs. Eastwood, striving vaguely against the feeling, felt as if she too was going to be cross-examined and to commit herself, which was not a comfortable frame of mind.

"So our children, ma'am, have been making fools of themselves," he said, with a twinkle of his eyes, after the preliminary observations about her health and the weather were over. He followed the words with a chuckle at the folly of the idea; and Mrs. Eastwood, who was anxiously determined to fill the part of "mère noble," was taken aback, and scarcely knew what to reply.

"They have taken a step," she said, breathless, "which must very seriously affect their happiness——"

"Just so," said Mr. Molyneux, "and you and I must see what can be done about it. Ernest is not a bad fellow, ma'am, but he is sadly imprudent. He plunges into a step like this, without ever thinking what is to come of it. I suppose he has told you what his circumstances are?"

Mrs. Eastwood replied by a somewhat stiff inclination of her head.

"Precisely like him," said his father, chuckling. "Not a penny to bless himself with, nor the least idea where to find one; and accordingly he goes and proposes to a pretty girl, and makes up his mind, I suppose, to set up housekeeping directly—Heaven help him!—upon nothing a year."

"This is not what he has said to me," said Mrs. Eastwood. "In the first place, though frankly avowing that he had nothing—beyond his allowance from you—I have understood from him that by greater diligence in the pursuit of his profession——"

Mrs. Eastwood was interrupted here, by a low "Ho, ho!" of laughter from her visitor—a very uncomfortable kind of interruption. To tell the truth, feeling that things were against her, and determined not to let down Nelly's dignity, she had taken refuge in a grandeur of expression which she herself was conscious might be beyond the subject. No woman likes to be laughed at; and Mrs. Eastwood grew twenty times more dignified as she became aware of the levity with which the other parent treated the whole affair.

"Ho! ho! ho! I recognize my boy in that," said Mr. Molyneux. "I beg your pardon, but Ernest is too great a wag to be resisted. Greater diligence in the pursuit of his profession! He ought to be made Lord Chancellor on the spot for that phrase. Are you aware, my dear ma'am, that he has never done anything, that boy of mine, in the pursuit of his profession, or otherwise, since he was born?"

"Am I to understand, Mr. Molyneux," said Mrs. Eastwood, slightly tremulous with offence and agitation, "that your object is to break off the engagement between my daughter and your son?"

"Nothing of the sort, ma'am; nothing of the sort," said Mr. Molyneux cheerfully. "I have no objections to your daughter; and if it did not happen with her, it would happen with some one else. It is for both our interests, though, that they don't do anything foolish. What they intend is that we should pay the piper——"

"You must do me the favour to speak for yourself, and your son," said Mrs. Eastwood, with spirit. "My child has no such idea. She has never known anything about such calculations; and I am sure she will not begin now."

"I beg your pardon, and Miss Nelly's pardon," said the great man, with an amused look. "I did not mean to reflect upon any one. But if she has not begun yet, I fear she will soon begin when she is Ernest's wife. They can't help it, ma'am. I am not blaming them. Once they are married, they must live; they must have a house over their heads and a dinner daily. I've no doubt Miss Nelly's an angel; but even an angel, when she has *weekly* bills coming in, and nothing to pay them with, will begin to *scheme.*"

"Such a thing appears to me quite impossible," said Mrs. Eastwood, in a flutter of suppressed indignation, and then she added, pausing to recover herself, "I must say at once, Mr. Molyneux, that if this is the way in which you are disposed to look at the matter, I should prefer to end the discussion. My daughter's happiness is very dear to me; but her credit, and my own credit, ought to be still more dear——"

"My dear ma'am," cried Mr. Molyneux, "now, tell me, as a matter of curiosity, how your credit is concerned, or why you should be angry? My point of view is that, of course, the young people mean to get as much as they can out of us——"

"Perhaps your son does, sir!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, exasperated. "You ought to know him best."

"Of course I know him best; and of course that is his object —to get as much as he can out of *me*," said Mr. Molyneux, pausing upon the pronoun. "Since you don't like it, I will leave the other side out of the question. I have known Ernest these eight and twenty years, and I ought to know what stuff he is made of. Now, as there are two parties to this bargain, we had better know exactly what we mean on either side. I did not want Ernest to marry now, and in case he did marry, he ought to have looked higher. I don't mean to be unpleasant, but I should have liked him to look out—let us say brutally—for more money. He has cost a deal of money in his day; and he ought to have brought in more. It is very likely, indeed, that your views were of a similar character. In that case, instead of wrangling, we ought to agree. Miss Nelly might have done better——"

"A great deal better," said the mother firmly, and with decision.

"Exactly so. At bottom we mean the same thing, though I may speak too roughly; but, like a couple of young fools, they have gone and run their heads into a net. Privately I admire your daughter very much," said Mr. Molyneux, with a certain oily change in his tone—a confession that the present subject under treatment was not to be bullied, but required more delicate dealing; "and though I say it that shouldn't, my son Ernest is a fine young fellow. They will make a handsome couple—just the kind of thing that would be delightful in a novel or in a poem—where they could live happy ever after, and never feel the want of money. But in this prosaic world things don't go on so comfortably. They have not a penny; that is the question that remains between you and me."

"Nelly has five thousand pounds; and he has—his profession," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a certain faltering in her voice.

"Well, well, well," said the wise man. "If we were all in a state of innocence, five thousand pounds would be something; and if we were a little wickeder, his profession might count; but the world is not so litigious as might be desired. My son is too grand to de-

mean himself to criminal cases like that inconsiderable mortal, his father. And do you mean them to live in London, my dear ma'am, upon Miss Nelly's twopence-halfpenny a year?"

"Indeed, I am not so foolish," cried Mrs. Eastwood; "beside thinking it wrong as a matter of principle. He must work, of course, before he can marry. He must have at least the prospect of a sufficient income before I should ever give my consent."

"A sufficient income earned by Ernest!" said Mr. Molyneux, with again that detestable "Ho, ho!" "Pardon me, my dear Mrs. Eastwood; but when I see how that boy has imposed upon you! No—believe me, who know him better, that if anything is to come of it, it must be done by you and me."

"I do not understand, Mr. Molyneux——"

"I quite believe it," he said, relapsing into carelessness just touched with contempt. "Ladies seldom understand such matters. If you will tell me the name of your solicitor, perhaps it would be better for me to talk the matter over with him."

"What is there to talk over?" said Mrs. Eastwood, once more roused into indignation. "I think, Mr. Molyneux, that we are speaking different languages. Nelly has her little fortune—as you know—and I am willing to allow her to wait till Ernest is in a position to claim her. I should not allow this without your approval, as his father. But as, so far, you have given your approval, what more does there remain to say?"

The great lawyer looked at his simple antagonist with a kind of stupefaction.

"We are indeed talking two different languages," he said. "Tell me who is your solicitor, my dear lady, and he and I will talk it over——"

"In a matter so important," said Mrs. Eastwood, plucking firmness from the emergency, "I prefer to act for myself."

Perhaps at this moment she achieved the greatest success of her life, though she did not know it. Mr. Molyneux was struck dumb. He stared at her, and he scratched his head like any bumpkin. He could not swear, nor storm, nor threaten, as he would sometimes do with the hapless people in the witness-box. He was obliged to be civil and smooth-spoken, and to treat her with a certain degree of politeness; for though he believed that Ernest might have done better, he had no desire to defy his son, who was, in his way, a formidable opponent, and he did not quite venture, knowing the sort of young man he had to deal with, to break off the match, or do anything violent tending that way.

"Then I must try what can be done by plainer language," he said, hiding his bewilderment under a specious appearance of candour. "We must throw away all circumlocution. Let us be reasonable. I will give my son so much a year, if you will give *your daughter so much* a year. That is what it comes to. If we

do this, there may be some possibility for them; but without this, nothing can be done; and of course, the allowance which you might be able to give her would determine to some extent what I should give him."

"What I might be able to give my daughter?" said Mrs. Eastwood, in surprise; "but I have nothing to do with it. I give her nothing—she comes into it by her grandfather's will."

"The five thousand pounds—yes, yes, I understand all about that," said Mr. Molyneux, with a mixture of disgust and weariness. This infinitesimal, but always recurring, morsel of money bored him. But he tried to keep his temper. He explained the duty of parents in such an emergency with great fulness. If a sacrifice had to be made, it must, he pointed out, be a mutual sacrifice. The question was not of five thousand pounds, or five thousand pence, but how to "make up an income" for the young people. Without an income there could be no marriage; it was not a matter of feeling, but of arrangement; if the one side did so much, the other side would do so much more. The great man explained the position with all his natural wealth of words, and with all the ease of wealth to which a hundred or two more of expenditure in a year mattered comparatively little. But Mrs. Eastwood, who, as the reader is aware, had enough, but not too much, listened with a dismay which she could scarcely disguise. She who had been obliged to put down her carriage in order to free her son, was not in a position to give large allowances to either son or daughter. She made the best effort she could to maintain her ground.

"I should have thought that your son, in your profession, in which you are so eminent——" she began with an attempt to propitiate her amicable adversary, who had changed the question so entirely from what appeared to her its natural aspect.

"In my profession, ma'am, a man stands on his own merits, not his father's," Mr. Molyneux answered, interrupting her with brusque decision. What was poor Mrs. Eastwood to do? She could not give to Nelly without being unjust to her other children, and yet how was she to have the heart to crush Nelly's happiness by refusing? A vision of her child, hollow-eyed and pale, casting pathetic glances at her, which would be worse than reproaches, flitted before her eyes. Girls have died ere now of separation from their lovers, and Nelly (the mother thought) was the kind of girl to break her heart without a complaint. Could she risk the breaking of Nelly's heart for a miserable question of money? This was an influence infinitely more subtle and potent than Mr. Molyneux's eloquence. While he talked the good mother fought it out in her own bosom. She gave her consent that he should see her solicitor and talk over the matter, with a sort of despairing acquiescence and that desperate trust in Providence which springs up in an oppressed soul when driven to its last resources. Something might "come in

the way." Nothing could be resolved upon at once; neither to-day nor to-morrow could call for immediate action, and something might come in the way.

Mr. Molyneux saw Nelly before he went away, and was kind and fatherly, kissing her on the forehead, an act which Mrs. Eastwood half resented, as somehow interfering with her absolute property in her child. The lover she tolerated, but the lover's father was odious to her. And this trial of her patience was all the more hard that she had to put the best face upon it before Nelly, and to say that Mr. Molyneux and she did not quite agree on some points, but that everything would come right by and by. Nelly had always been her mother's confidant, knowing everything, and thrusting her ready youthful opinion and daring undoubting advice into whatever was going on, and to shut her out now from all participation in this crowning care was unspeakably hard.

And then the nature of the vexation which she had thus to conceal within herself was so doubly odious—a question of money, which made her appear even to herself as if she was a niggard where her child's happiness was involved, she who had never grudged Nelly anything all her life! Other disagreeables, too, mingled in the matter. To be roused from the pleasant confidence that all your friends think well of you by the sudden discovery that some of them, at least, hold very lightly the privilege of your special alliance, is not in itself consolatory. Everything connected with the subject turned somehow into pain. Since the time when the carriage was put down, no such incident had occurred in the family, and Frederick's debts, which were a kind of natural grief in their way (for has not every man debts?), were not half so overwhelming as this, nor did they bring half so many troubles in their train.

When the love of lovers comes into a house which has hitherto been kept warm and bright by the loves of parent and children, brother and sister, the first thing it does in most cases is to make a rent and division. It calls out the sense of self and personal identity, it breaks the soft silken bonds of nature, and turns the hands a little while ago so closely linked almost against each other. Nelly thought her mother was hard to her Ernest, and Ernest thought his future mother-in-law was already developing the true mother-in-law character, and was about to become his natural enemy. He could not help giving hints of this to his betrothed, which made Nelly unhappy. And then her mother would find her crying, and on asking why, would be assailed with pitiful remonstrances.

"Dear mamma, why should you turn against Ernest? You used to like him well enough. Is it because I am fond of him that *you turn* against him?" Thus Nelly would moan, rending her *mother's heart.*

All this introduced the strangest new commotion into the peaceful household, and the reader will not wonder that poor Mrs. Eastwood, thus held on the rack, was a little impatient of other annoyances. On the very evening of the day on which she had the interview with Mr. Molyneux above recorded, when she was going through the hall on her way up-stairs, another vexing and suggestive incident disturbed her. The hall was square with one little deep window on one side of the door, the recess of which was filled with a window seat. Here some one was seated, half visible in the darkness, with a head pressed against the window, gazing out. Nothing could be more unlike the large windows of the Palazzo Scaramucci, but the attitude and act were the same. Mrs. Eastwood stopped, half alarmed, and watched the motionless figure. Then she went forward with a wondering uneasiness.

"Is it you, Innocent?" she said.

"Yes."

"What are you doing here? It is too cold to stand about in the hall, and, besides, it is not a proper place for you. Go into the drawing-room, dear, or come up-stairs with me. What are you doing here?"

"I am waiting," said Innocent.

"For what, for whom?" said the mother, alarmed.

"For Frederick," said the girl, with a long drawing out of breath, which was almost a sigh.

CHAPTER XV.

A SUNDAY AT HOME.

INNOCENT, it may well be supposed, had been thrown into the shade by these great events in Nelly's history, and yet she was, notwithstanding, a most important element in the discomfort which began to creep into the house. The very first day after her arrival she had begun her strange career. Brought down-stairs for meals, she would sit very quietly, eating or pretending to eat what was offered to her—and much of what was offered to her was so strange to her that she fared but badly, poor child, until a new habit had begun to form, and the wholesome appetite of youth had driven away her prejudices. It is a whimsical thought, and one which we are aware the British intellect in general declines to contemplate, that frog-eating foreigners, or those still more miserable specimens

of humanity who are brought up upon maccaroni and polenta, should not when they come among us take any more enthusiastically to our richer fare than we do to theirs; but yet, strange to say, this is unquestionably the case—and poor Innocent had very little to eat for the first few days, not knowing the looks of things, and hesitating, as the inexperienced always do, to venture upon the unknown. When the meal was over, unless absolute moral force was exerted to restrain her, she escaped at once to her own room, her constant occupancy of which became at once a standing grievance of the housemaid, who immediately settled in her mind that this unusual course of procedure was suggested by an ardent desire to spy upon her movements, and to report her imperfections to her mistress. There were countless complaints from this quarter about the impossibility of "cleaning out" Miss Innocent's room, or even of "cleaning out" Miss Ellinor's room, which adjoined, or, in short, of doing anything whatever under the constant inspection of the stranger's eyes. What with this offence against the housemaid of being constantly in her bedroom, and the offence against the cook of never being satisfied with anything at table, and the offence against Brownlow of paying no attention to his intimations that dinner was ready, Innocent was in bad odour with all the servants except Alice, who stood by her quietly, without any warmer applause, however, than that there was no "hairm in the girl." In the higher regions Innocent made a still more puzzling and painful impression. When she could be retained among them she sat dumb in a corner, generally near one of the windows, saying nothing, answering "Yes" and "No" to the questions addressed to her, doing nothing, presenting a blank, impenetrable surface of silence to all the attempts at friendly intercourse made by the lively and genial group which she intruded herself amongst like a figure of stone. She would obey when absolutely commanded, and for the immediate moment of the command—but then only as by machinery, without the least appearance of entering into the spirit of the directions given her, or wishing to please, or desiring to bring herself into accord with her surroundings. No idea, indeed, of putting herself in accord with her surroundings seemed ever to enter into her mind. She was an alien in her own consciousness, altogether untouched by the distress, the vexation, the bewilderment caused by her self-isolation. Perhaps if, as Mrs. Eastwood said, they had been able to love the girl heartily, and by nature, without any action of hers to call it forth, they might have thawed the snow-image. But beyond the natural bounds of the family, love ceases to be given in this instinctive, causeless way, and nobody can long resist the repellant effect of a perpetual non-response. The girl was a worry and vexation to Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly, and she was the cause of much suppressed merriment to Dick, who held that she was sulky, and giving herself airs, and ought to be laughed

at. Jenny, as the reader has been informed, looked at the matter in a more philosophical way; but neither nature nor philosophy threw any light upon the darkness, or suggested any way of mending the matter. The strange girl in their midst occupied the ladies (before the moment of Nelly's engagement) perpetually. They took her out, they tried to amuse her, they tried to sympathize with her, they asked countless questions, and elicited many details of her former life; but they never moved her with all their pettings and coaxings to say one word to them, or to stay one moment with them longer than she was compelled.

This was the outside aspect of affairs, as seen by those surrounding her, who were much discouraged in every way by the strange passiveness of the new comer; but to Innocent herself the world bore a different appearance, as may be supposed. She had been brought up in utter solitude; her father, who cared little for her, and took little notice of her, and Niccolo, who had done everything, were the two sole figures with which she was familiar. Other human forms she had seen going about the streets, gliding round her in a strange, dull phantasmagoria, without touching her. Her intellect was feeble, or so partially awakened that she had never yet begun to think of her own position either present or future, or connexion with the rest of humanity. All that life had yet been to her was a window through which she had seen other people, bearing no connexion with herself, moving about with mysterious comings, and going through a world not realized. She had watched them with a certain dull wonder. Their occupations and their activity surprised without interesting her. Why should they take so much trouble, why keep so constantly in motion? And then the whirlwind had seemed to seize herself, to whirl her through air and space, through a still stranger phantasmagoria—moving pictures of sea and land, and to set her down in the very heart of one of those strange groups of people who were so unlike anything she had ever known, people who clustered together and talked and laughed and had a great deal to do with each other, but among whom she felt as strange as a stray olive leaf dropped among the cast-off garments of English beech and elm. She could not mix with them. She felt no interest in what they did or said, and no desire to feel any interest. She was even secretly vexed, as much as her dulled nature would allow, by all the care taken of her, the demands which she was daily conscious they made, the disappointment with her irresponsiveness, which more or less they all showed. Why could not they let her alone? She had not, as Nelly sometimes supposed, any conventional prepossession in her mind, or feeling that she, the penniless niece and dependent, must be of necessity slighted and kept down, an idea which does take possession of some natures, and cause much unreasonable mischief. Such a notion, however, was much too complicated, much too profound for the mind of Innocent. It

was not so much that she had a false impression about her relationship with them as that she had no real conception of any relationship at all. She accepted her external surroundings mechanically, without even asking herself what right she had to be an inmate of her aunt's house, or to be cared for as she was. Gratitude was more than impossible to her; she did not know what the word meant. She had never asked to be brought to Mrs. Eastwood's house; it occurred to her in her ignorance that she would rather have stayed in Pisa, but it never occurred to her to ask why she could not stay in Pisa, why Niccolo had been sent away, and she brought here. She had never possessed more than a franc or two in her life, and had no idea of the value of money or its necessity. In short, the development of her mind was rather that of six than sixteen. Nothing was formed in her except the striking personality and individuality that shut her up within herself as within a husk, and kept her from mingling with others. This absence of all capability of thought or feeling, this perfect blank and stupefaction of intellect and heart, took away from her all that lively sense of novelty, all that interest in the unknown which is so strong and so beneficent in youth. She did not ask to understand either the things or persons round her. She accepted them dully, as she would have accepted any other order of things; they did not affect her at all; they moved her neither to love nor to hatred, scarcely even to wonder; through them all she pursued her own dull way, crossed by these other threads of existence perforce, but never entangling with them, or allowing herself to be woven into the common web. Their outcries and laughter, their manifestations of feeling, their fondness for each other, the perpetual movement of life among them, affected her only with a vague surprise too faint for that lively title, and a still more languid contempt. She had nothing in common with them; they were, it seemed to her, restless, afflicted with a fever of activity, bound by some treadmill necessity to talk, and walk, and move about, and be always doing, of which her frame and mind were totally unconscious. A vague resentment against them—the girl scarcely knew why—for disturbing her with their companionship, and subjecting her to such strange demands for a sympathy which she had not to give, and an affection for which she felt no need, gave a certain reality to the mistiness of her sensations. But that was all; she came among them like a thing dropped out of another sphere, having no business, no pleasure, nothing whatever to do or to learn upon this alien earth.

But there was an exception to this rule. Innocent clung to Frederick as a savage might cling to the one white man who had brought her out of her woods and from among her people into the strange and beautiful world of civilized life. She knew him, though *she knew no one else.* Frederick was her revelation, her one discovery *out of the darkness* which surrounded every other nature.

She formed no very close or distinct estimate of him, but at least she was conscious of another existence which affected her own, and upon which she was to some degree dependent. When Mrs. Eastwood found her lurking in the hall in the cold and darkness, waiting for Frederick, an immediate and full-grown love tale glimmered before the unfortunate mother's eyes, filling her with dismay. But Innocent's thoughts had taken no such form. She was as unconscious of love as of any other passion, and had as little idea of anything to follow as a baby. It was, however, her only point of human interest, the sole thing which drew her out of herself. When Frederick was present she had eyes only for him; when he spoke she listened, not much understanding what he said, but vaguely stimulated by the very sound of his voice. When he told her to do anything she made an effort to bring her mind to bear upon it, and somehow took in what he said. The moment when he came home was the moment to which she looked forward the whole day through. A vague sense that he understood her, that he did not ask too much from her like the others, made no bewildering demand on her comprehension, but accepted what she gave with a matter-of-fact simplicity equal to her own, gave her confidence in him. Could she have been with Frederick alone she would have been happy; or would he even have permitted her to sit close to him, or hold his hand, while the bewildering conversation of the others—conversation which they expected her to join in and understand—was going on around, Innocent would have been more able to bear it. This, however, he had privately explained to her could not be.

"When we are alone I do not mind," he said, with a condescension which suited his natural temper, "but when we are with the others it makes you ridiculous, Innocent; and what is more, it makes me ridiculous. They laugh at both you and me."

"Why should they laugh?" asked the girl.

"Because it is absurd," he said, frowning. "I cannot allow you to make me a laughing-stock. Of course, as I tell you, I don't mind so much when we are alone."

And he stroked her hair with a caressing kindness which was at that time about the best sentiment in the young man's mind. He was often embarrassed by her, and sometimes had asked himself the question, What on earth was it to come to? for he too, like his mother, believed that Innocent was in love with him; and the love of such a girl, so manifested, was more absurd than gratifying. But yet he was always kind to her. Evil impulses enough of one kind and another were in his mind, and he could have made of this girl anything he pleased, his slave, the servant of his will in any way. But he never treated her otherwise than as his little sister, and was kind, and put up with her demonstrative affection, and did his best to advise her "for her good."

"You must not shrink so from my mother and Nelly," he said. "They want to be kind to you. If you could only take to them, it would be much better for you than taking to a fellow like me——"

"I don't like women," said Innocent. "My father always said so. I cannot help being one myself, but I hate them. And nobody is like you."

"That is very pleasant for me," said Frederick, "but you must not keep up that notion about women. Your father was a capital judge, I have no doubt, but he might have taught you something more useful. Depend upon it, you will never be happy till you make friends with your own sex. They may be dangerous to men, though men are not generally of your opinion," continued the moralist, "but for you, Innocent, mark my words, it is far your best policy to make the women your friends."

"What is policy?" she asked, stealing her hand into his, much as a dog puts his nose into his master's hand.

"Pshaw!" said Frederick. His mother had come into the room and had seen this pantomime. "You ought to be put to school and learn English," he added, somewhat roughly. "I don't believe she understands half of what we say."

"Indeed, I should not be sorry to think so," said Mrs. Eastwood, not without severity in her tone. But the severity was lost upon Innocent. She understood, as she did always by some strange magic understand Frederick, that she was now to withdraw from him and do her best to appear indifferent. It was a Sunday afternoon, rainy and miserable—and a rainy Sunday afternoon, when English domestic virtue shuts up all its ordinary occupations, is, it must be allowed, a dreary moment. I do not at all agree in the ordinary conventional notion of the dreariness of English Sundays generally, but I allow that a Sunday afternoon, when all the good people are at home, when the children are forbidden to play, and the women's work is carefully put away, as if innocent embroidery were sin, and the men do not know what to do with themselves, is trying. If you are musical to the extent of Handel you may be happy, but the only thing to be done otherwise in a good orthodox respectable family, bound by all the excellent English traditions, is to pick a quarrel with some one. About five o'clock or so, with the rain pouring steadily down into the garden, the flower-beds becoming puddles before your eyes, the trees looking in upon you like pitiful ghosts—if you have not dared the elements and gone to afternoon church, you must quarrel or you must die.

Mrs. Eastwood felt the necessity. She called Frederick close to her, and she addressed him in an undertone. Innocent had gone away, and placed herself in a chair close by the window. She had not even "taken a book"—the impossibility of making her ever "take a book" was one of the miseries of the house. She was *gazing blankly out* upon the rain, upon the trees that shivered and



"*She drew Frederick* to her, and laid her hand upon his arm."

seemed to ask for shelter, and the beds, where a draggled line of closed-up crocuses were leaning their bosoms upon the mud. Her beautiful profile was outlined distinctly against the pale gray dreary light. It *was* a beautiful profile always, more beautiful than the full face, which wanted life. Blank as the day itself was her countenance, with that motiveless gaze which was, indeed, almost mystic in its absolute want of animation. Her hands were crossed upon her lap, her whole limp girlish figure seemed to sympathize with the dreariness outside. Mrs. Eastwood looked with a mixture of pity, sympathy, and disapproval at this apathetic, immovable being, so self-absorbed, and yet so childish and pitiful in her self-absorption. She drew Frederick to her and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Frederick, look there," she said in a low tone, "if you were not in the room Innocent would rush off up-stairs. She stays only for you. I saw you just now with her as I came in. For God's sake, take care what you are about. You are turning that child's head."

"Bah! nonsense," said Frederick, freeing himself with a complacent smile.

"It is not nonsense. I have watched her since ever she came. She has neither eyes nor ears but for you."

"Is that my fault?" said Frederick, making a motion as if to break away.

"I do not say it is your fault. Stop and hear what I have to say. It was very good of you, no doubt, to be so kind to her on the journey, to gain her confidence——"

"Your words are very nice, mother," said Frederick, "but your tone implies that it was anything but good of me, as if I had gained her confidence with an evil intention——"

"Frederick! how dare you put such a suggestion into my lips? If I were to answer you as you deserve, I should say that only a guilty mind could have thought of such a thing, or thought that I could think of it," cried Mrs. Eastwood, becoming involved in expression as she lost her temper. This heat on both sides was entirely to be attributed to the Sunday afternoon. On arriving so near the brink of the quarrel as this, Mrs. Eastwood paused.

"Sunday is not a day for quarrelling," she said, "and heaven knows I have no wish to quarrel with any one, much less my own boy; but Frederick, dear, you must let me warn you. You do not know the world as I do (heaven help the innocent soul!) nor how people are led on further than they have any intention; nor how the simplest kindness on your part may affect the imagination of a girl. She is not much more than a child——"

"She is an utter child—and a fool besides," said Frederick, throwing the female creature about whom he was being lectured overboard at once, as a sacrifice to the waves, according to the wont of man.

"I would not say that," said Mrs. Eastwood doubtfully. "She is a very strange girl, but I do not like to think she is a fool; and as for being a child—a child of sixteen is very near a woman—and, my dear, without meaning it, without thinking of it, you might do a great deal of harm. With a brooding sort of girl like this, you can never tell what may be going on. If she was one to speak out and say what she is thinking, like my Nelly——"

"Nelly! Well, to do her justice, she is very different from Nelly," said Frederick, with that natural depreciation of his sister which is also usual enough, and which was largely increased by Sunday-afternoonishness.

"No, indeed, she is not like Nelly, more's the pity," said Mrs. Eastwood, fortunately not detecting the injurious tone. "She is so shut up in herself that you can never tell what may be going on within her. I am sure you don't mean it, Frederick, but sometimes I think, for Innocent's own sake, it would be better if you were not quite so kind. I don't like her waiting for you in the hall, and that sort of thing. There is no harm in it, I know—but I don't like it. It is always an unpleasant thing to have ideas—which she would be better without—put into a girl's head."

"You are too mysterious for me to follow," said Frederick. "What ideas? If you will be a little more plain in your definition——"

She was his mother, and thought she knew a great deal more than he did about life; but she blushed as red as a girl at this half-contemptuous question.

"Frederick, you know very well what I mean," she said quickly, "and I hope you will not try to make me sorry that I have appealed to you at all. You may make Innocent more fond of you than will be good for her, poor child, and that can produce nothing but unhappiness. I am not finding fault, I am only warning you. Her I cannot warn, because she so shuts herself up. She is a mystery," said poor Mrs. Eastwood, shaking her head.

"Whip her," said Frederick, with a little scornful laugh; and he walked off to the library, where Dick was pretending to read, and really teaching Winks, who had been having a *mauvais quart d'heure*, and whose patience was so utterly exhausted that nothing but his regard for the family could have kept him from snapping. Winks made his escape when the door was opened, and rushed to the drawing-room, where nobody was allowed to insult his intellect by tricks. He came and sat up before his mistress on his hind legs, waving his feathery forepaws in expostulation. She understood him, which is consolatory alike to dogs and men. The tears had come into her eyes at the unkind scorn of Frederick's tone, but this other complaint brought a little laughter and carried off the *sharpness.* "*Yes,* Winks, they are wicked boys," she said, half *laughing, half crying.* Dick declared after that Winks had been

"sneaking," and I think the dog himself was a little ashamed of having told; but it did the mother good, and set her thinking of her Dick, who was not too bright, nor yet very industrious, but the honestest fellow!—and that thought made her laugh, and healed the little prick in her heart.

CHAPTER XVI.

INNOCENT'S FIRST ADVENTURE.

INNOCENT had remained quite unconscious that she was the subject of this conversation. She was still a little in doubt even of the words of a dialogue carried on by others. The quickness of utterance which strikes every one when hearing an unaccustomed language, the half completed phrases, the words half said, confused her mind, which was not equal to such a strain, and her want of interest in the matter limited her comprehension tenfold more. She sat with her profile marked out against the light, the line of the curtains falling just beyond her, the garden furnishing a vague background, until some time after Frederick had left the room. She had scarcely moved while she sat there; there was nothing to look at, nothing to occupy her, but that did not matter to Innocent. When Frederick was gone she, too, moved a little, and after a few minutes stole out and up-stairs like a ghost. She went to her room, stealing through Nelly's, where her cousin was occupied about some of the little legitimate Sunday employments which a good English girl may permit herself on a rainy Sunday. Nelly made some little friendly observation, but Innocent glided past and closed the door upon her. Innocent, however, had nothing to do; she sat down by the fireplace, where, Mrs. Eastwood being extravagant in this particular, there burned a cheery little fire. But the fire was no comfort to her. So far as she had any feeling at all, she disliked the warm little room, with all its cushions and curtains, and its position so close to her cousin's. Now and then she thought of the cold and bare rooms at the Palazzo Scaramucci, so large and empty, and lonely, with something like a sigh. Her life there, which was so void of any interest, so blank and companionless, came back upon her as if it had been something better, more natural than this. There no one bade her talk, bade her do anything; no one cared what she was about. She might stand for hours at the window, looking out, and no one would chide her or ask why she did so. Books and music, and such perplexing additions to life, had no existence there: and in Pisa there was room enough to move about,

and air enough to breathe. With the help of a scaldino, and the old velvet cloak, which she kept in her box now, she had been able to keep the cold at bay; but here she grew drowsy over the fire, and had no need for her cloak. There too she might do what she pleased, and no one ever said Why?—no one except Niccolo, who did not matter. Whereas now she could not go in or out of her room without being observed, without having somebody to peep at her and to say, "Ah, it is you." What did it matter who it was? If people would but let her alone! I do not know how long she had been alone, shut up in the little room, when Nelly knocked at the door. During the short time since Innocent's arrival Nelly had gone through a great many different states of mind respecting her. She had been eager, she had been sympathetic, she had been sorry, she had been angry, and then she had recommenced and been sympathetic, sorry, and indignant again. The only thing Nelly could not do, though she advised her mother with great fervour to do it, was to let the stranger alone.

"Leave her to herself, mamma," Nelly said with precocious wisdom, "let us have patience, and by and by she will see that we mean her nothing but good, and she will come to herself."

This was admirable advice if Nelly herself could only have taken it. But she could not; a dangerous softness would come over her at the very height of her resolution. She would say to herself, "Poor Innocent, how lonely she must be!" and would go again and commit herself, and endeavour in another and yet another way to melt the unmeltable. On this Sunday she had begun the day very strongly in the mind that it was best to leave Innocent alone; but the sight of the pale girl gliding past, escaping to her solitude, shutting herself up alone, was too much for Nelly. The soft-hearted creature resisted her impulse as long as possible, and then she gave in. Surely this time there must be an opening somehow to the shut-up heart. She knocked softly at the closed door, which, indeed, Innocent had almost closed upon her. "May I come in?" she said softly. It was not easy to make out the answer which came reluctantly from within; but Nelly interpreted it to mean consent. She went in and sat down by the fire, and began to talk. It was before her engagement, and she had not that one unfailing subject to excite Innocent's interest upon, if that were possible; but she chattered as only a well-conditioned good-hearted girl can do, trying to draw the other from her own thoughts. Then she proposed suddenly an examination of the house. "You have never been over the house, Innocent; come, there is no harm in doing that on Sunday. There is a whole floor of attics over this, and the funniest hiding-holes; and there are some curiosities which, if we only could find room for them, are well worth seeing. Are you *fond of china*, or pictures? Tell me what you like most."

"*No,*" *said Innocent,* "nothing."

"Oh, that is just because you don't know. China is my delight. If I had my way I would cram the drawing-room; but mamma is no true connoisseur; she likes only what is pretty. Come along and I will show you the house."

Innocent rose, more to avoid controversy than from any interest in the house. Nelly showed her a great many interesting things in the attics; an old screen, which you or I, dear reader, would have given our ears for; a whole set of old oak furniture, which had once been in the library; old prints, turned with their faces to the wall; and one or two family portraits. The girl moved quite unaffected through all these delights. She neither knew their value nor saw their beauty. She answered Nelly's questions with yes or no, and vaguely longed to get away again. To do what?—nothing. Once, and only once, she was moved a little. It was when Nelly introduced her into the old schoolroom, a bare room, with a sloping roof and two windows, looking away over the elms to the suburban road some distance off, which led into London, and showed moving specks of figures, carriages, and people, diminished by the distance, over the bare tops of the trees. There were neither curtains nor carpets in this bare place. It was cold and deserted, apart from the other rooms, up a little staircase by itself. Innocent gave a cry of something like pleasure when she went in. "I like this room," she said, and it was about the first unsuggested observation she had made since her arrival. "May I come and live here?"

"Here! far away from us all?" cried Nelly, "with no furniture, no pictures, nothing to make you cheerful! It would seem like banishment to put you here. You do not mean to say you like this bare little place?"

"Yes," said the girl, "I can breathe here. I can see out of the windows; and I should not trouble anybody. I like this best."

"Innocent, you must not talk of troubling anybody. All that troubles us is when we think you are not happy."

"I should be happy here," she said wistfully, sitting down on the ledge of the window, which was low, and turning her gaze to the distant road.

"Oh, Innocent!" said Nelly, half inclined to cry in her disappointment; "if you knew how much I wished to make your room pretty, how I worked at it, and how anxious mamma and I were to make it look like home to you! We thought you would feel less lonely if you were close to us, and felt that we were within call night and day. We hoped you would grow fond of us, Innocent! You don't really mean that you would like to get away from mamma and me?"

To this appeal Innocent made no immediate answer. She looked far away over the tree tops, and watched the omnibuses, crawling like flies along the road. It was not a beautiful or exciting sight,

but it soothed her somehow, like "the woven paces and the waving hands" of Merlin's spell—the subtle influence of motion apart from herself, which acted upon her like a cadence and rhythm. Then she said slowly, as if to herself, "I like this best."

"Oh, you cold-hearted, unkind thing!" cried impetuous Nelly, growing red and angry. "After all we have done and tried to do to make you comfortable! Don't you care for anything or any one? Good heavens! how can any girl be so indifferent! You deserve to have nobody care for you; you deserve to be kept by yourself, to be allowed to do whatever you please, never to be minded or thought of. You deserve—to be shaken!" said Nelly, with all the heat of sudden passion.

Innocent turned round and looked at her, vaguely wondering; though she did not comprehend the gentler emotions, she knew what it was to be scolded. It was an experience she had gone through before. Her father and Niccolo had both scolded her, and the sound was familiar. Perhaps it might even have penetrated her apathy, and roused some sort of life in her, had not poor Nelly been smitten by instant compunction, and gone down metaphorically on her knees to expiate her fault.

"Oh, what a wretch I am," cried Nelly, "to lose patience with you like this, you poor, dear, little lonely child. I dare say you will care for us in time. I did not mean to be disagreeable, Innocent. It was only disappointment and vexation, and my horrid temper. Forgive me, won't you?" she said, taking the girl's hand. Innocent let it drop as soon as she could extricate her fingers. She was moved only to wonder, and a feeling scarcely lively enough to be called impatience—weariness of this perpetual emotion. Nelly seemed to her to be always laughing or crying, always demanding sympathy, requiring to be responded to, asking answers which by no strain of her nature could Innocent give.

"Oh, don't!" she said, as her cousin put her arms round her and pleaded for pardon. Poor Nelly, transported with anger and repulsed kindness, had nearly blazed up again, but fortunately restrained herself, looking with a kind of dismay at the other's composure, which, indeed, was a little disturbed by confused amazement, but nothing more.

"You are a very strange girl," she said, drawing away with a feeling of offence which had never before surmounted her friendliness and pity; "but if you will keep us all at arm's length, I suppose you must be allowed to do it. If you wish for it very much mamma, I am sure, will let you have this room."

"I could sleep there," said Innocent, pointing to a hard little settee, which Nelly knew was far from luxurious.

"Oh, you need not be afraid. I shall take care that you are comortable," said indignant Nelly, and she went away down-stairs with *dignity to lay the case* before her mother. "You know the way

back to your own room?" she said, pausing at the door. "As it is Sunday we cannot make the change to-day." Innocent heard, and gazed at her, but made no answer. She did not know how she had offended her cousin; neither, it is true, did she care; but yet a certain surprise awoke in her mind. Why was Nelly angry? What was there to make any one angry? Innocent did not connect the "scolding" which she was aware of with anything that might have called it forth. Scolding was in her experience a phenomenon by itself, not attached by way of cause and effect to any other phenomena. Many times in her life she had been scolded; but very seldom could she have told why. In this present case the cause was one entirely beyond her moral grasp. If she had broken a china tea cup or torn a dress, these would have been tangible causes of displeasure, which her mind could have taken in; but this was altogether mysterious. Perhaps it was partially owing to the strange way in which she had been brought up, and the absence of natural love in her early life, that Innocent's entire mental constitution was of so peculiar a kind. She had no consciousness of the home affections, no need of them, no perception of their sweetness. Whether there might not be in her the capacity for a great love was yet unproved; but she had no affections. Such a condition of nature is not so rare perhaps as we think. There are both men and women who can love with passion the lover or the mistress, the husband or the wife, but who remain through all the warmth of that one possibility cold as death to all other affections. The decorous guise of ordinary life prevents such natures from making themselves fully visible in many cases. But Innocent was like a savage; she was unaware of the necessity of those gentle pretences and veils of apparent feeling which hold civilized life together. Therefore she sinned openly, and, so to speak, innocently, against the softer natural sentiments which are general to humanity, yet did not exist in her own bosom. She knew nothing about them, and she had never been taught to feign a virtue which she did not possess.

She sat in her newly-found refuge till she was thoroughly chilled with cold, and gazing from the window she found out an object which exercised some influence upon her afterwards, and got her into some immediate trouble. This was a little chapel in the distant road, which some freak of her imagination connected with that little church of the Spina which she had been in the habit of frequenting in Pisa in so strange and passive a way. I need not tell the gentle reader that the Methodist chapel in the Brighton-road was profoundly unlike any chapel ever dedicated to Our Lady. This particular Little Bethel, however, was ornamented in front with some stucco pinnacles and tabernacle work, which caught at a stray corner of Innocent's memory. She had been taken to church that very morning, to a church utterly unlike Santa Maria della Spina—a huge place, with pews and galleries full of people, where she had looked on

at a service of which she had very little knowledge, and listened to a sermon which she never attempted to understand. A longing for her old haunt came upon her as she saw the place which seemed to recall it to her mind. If she could but get there it seemed to her that part of her old life—with which she had never been dissatisfied —would come back.

Innocent had so far felt the thrill of awakening novelty and change as to know that her present life was not satisfactory, though rather in the instinctive way of sensation than by any conscious thought. The little chapel possessed her not with any idea of improvement or knowledge to be gained, but only as a possible means of drawing back to her a scrap of the past. Innocent had a consciousness that were she to rush out immediately to find this place she would be stopped and "scolded," or perhaps locked in, and prevented for ever from gratifying her wish, so she resisted her impulse to go at once. The dreary afternoon by this time was over, and the dressing-bell sounded its welcome summons through the house. Frederick was dining out, so that there was nothing to detain her in the drawing-room during the evening. She stole up to her room as soon as dinner was over, and, taking her old velvet cloak from her trunk, and the old black hat which she had worn in Pisa, stole very carefully down-stairs, and out into the darkness. Nobody saw her making her stealthy exit, and it was with a strange sense of bewildered freedom mixed with fear that she found herself out of doors alone, in the drizzling rain and darkness. She had no superstitious terrors, however, of any kind, her imagination being too little active to make them possible, and she had run down the long dark stairs of the Palazzo Scaramucci too often to be afraid merely of the dark. It was the novelty, the uncertainty as to how to turn and where to go that moved her. However, Innocent had the good fortune which so often attends the beginning of a foolish enterprise. By a maze of muddy turnings, which she took aright by mere luck, and without making any note of them for guidance on her return, she managed to make her way to the chapel. It was resounding with the clangour of a hymn, chanted at the top of their voices by the young men and young women who form in all places and in all churches the majority of the evening worshippers. The noise startled this poor little pilgrim; but she stole in notwithstanding, to the mean little building full of pews and glaring gas-lights, which was like and yet unlike Mr. Browning's wonderful description. The sight of the place inside startled Innocent still more. The quaint darkness of her little Italian church, the silent people kneeling and sitting here and there, the priest proceeding with his uncomprehended mystery at the altar, the glimmer of the tapers, the odour of the incense, were strangely replaced by the glare of light, the clangour of the hymn, the people packed close in their pews, who stared at the lonely girl as she entered. The chapel was very full; but Innocent, whose instinct

led her to the dark corners, found a refuge in a dim pew close to the door, underneath the little gallery, where, after a while, a grim old pew-opener with a black bonnet came and sat beside her. Innocent went through her own little simple formula; she kneeled down and said the Lord's Prayer; and then she seated herself and gazed towards the pulpit, which stood in place of the altar. I do not know whether the sermon that followed would of itself have attracted her attention any more than the more regular and decorous one which she had heard in the morning. But while poor Innocent sat looking rather than listening, and began to think of repeating her prayer and going away again, the old woman at her side uttered a groan which chilled the very blood in her veins. The girl shrank away from her into the corner of the pew as far as she could go, and turned her eyes from the pulpit to her terrible neighbour. But no sooner had she recoiled thus than a man in front of her uttered another exclamation. The preacher was one famous in the Wesleyan connexion, whose appearance prepared his audience for excitement, and as he went on the exclamations grew louder and louder. Innocent, who had no understanding of this proceeding at all, who could not make out even the words of those cries which rose around her, was first startled into fright, and then frozen into physical terror. I don't know what dreadful vision of savages and cannibals and human sacrifices came into her bewildered mind; a mixture of fairy tales and those horrors of ghosts and vampires which still linger about Italy, and which she had heard, though at an ordinary moment her memory would not have retained them. The old woman by her side was pale and haggard, with long teeth and large jaws. She groaned at regular intervals, so regular that Innocent got to be prepared for them, though they made her jump each time they sounded on her ear. When her endurance was almost at an end, and she had become sick with very fear, there came a lull in the proceedings; a hymn was sung, and part of the congregation went out. Innocent made an anxious effort to go too, but the old woman stood immovable between her and the door, and the girl watched with agony the last figures retiring, and an evident movement to begin again taking place. "Let me go! Let me go!" she cried in her terror. The old woman clutched her shoulder with long, lean fingers, which looked like claws to the girl's excited fancy. She approached her face to Innocent's ear, and hoarsely whispered something which she did not understand. Innocent was half frantic with fear. She did not know what might be the next step. It seemed to her that other people were approaching her, and that she saw the gleam of knives, an idea which was natural enough to her Italian breeding. She uttered one loud shriek, and springing over into the pew in front rushed out of the chapel, pushing down some one in her passage. It seemed to her that she heard steps pursuing as she flew madly along the dimly-lighted road. She had taken the turn towards

London in her bewilderment, and by the time she lost breath and was obliged to stop, had come to the verge of a greater thoroughfare, crowded and noisy. No one had come after her, though she had thought she heard steps resounding close behind. She stopped short, panting for breath; and, leaning against a wall, looked round her in dismay up at the dark sky, and down at the muddy road, and along the long line of dim lamps and passing figures, all strange, and without help for her. When the full sense of her helplessness, her loneliness, her desolation, burst upon her, she crouched down upon the pavement close to the wall, and burst into tears. "Niccolo! Niccolo!" she cried, with a wail of childish despair. Another girl in such circumstances would have called upon God or her mother; but Innocent knew nothing of her mother, and very little of God. The only being who had always been helpful to her was Niccolo. She called upon him with a bitter cry of helplessness. Niccolo in Pisa—how could he come to her? What could he do for her? But other help—less tender, less sure than Niccolo's—was approaching slowly to her along the crowded way.

CHAPTER XVII.

FREDERICK TO THE RESCUE.

"WHAT is wrong?" said one of two young men who were coming along the road.

"Bah! what does it matter to us?" said his companion.

This companion was Frederick Eastwood. He had dined out, and he had looked in for half an hour at his club, and he was now walking leisurely home with a friend who was going the same way. Why should two gentlemen thus making their way homewards on a Sunday evening pay any attention to a group of people gathered on the muddy pavement? But the curiosity of his companion was stronger than Frederick's indifference. There were a dozen or so of people standing round some one who was crouching down against the wall, and there was a policeman in the middle.

"Ask her her name; even if she's furrin' she'll give some sort of an answer to that," suggested one of the bystanders.

"It is some tipsy woman," said Frederick; but the next moment he changed colour, and stepped into the midst of the crowd.

"Call me a cab," he said to his amazed friend, and put out his hand to grasp, not very gently, at the old cloak which he recognized. "Heaven and earth! what has brought you here?" he said, in a tone of passion. The crouching figure uttered a cry, and, springing *up at once, rushed* upon him and clung to his arm.

"She's found her young man at last," said some one in the crowd; and the very policeman grinned as he cast the light of his lantern upon poor Innocent, who, pale and scared, and dazzled by the light, clung closer and closer to her cousin.

"Oh, Frederick, I lost my way. Take me home! take me home!" she cried piteously.

"Why did you ever leave home, you little fool?" he asked, and thrust her savagely into the cab which drove up. He threw a coin to the policeman, and waved a good-night to his companion. He did not give any explanation. It was better, he thought, to leave his friend to suppose that this was some adventure—some disreputable acquaintance whom he took the trouble to help, than to let him know who it really was whom he had found in such a position. But he was savage when he got into the cab, and thrust away the girl, who put out her trembling hands to cling to him once more.

"How can you be such an idiot?" he said. "Where next must I pick you out of? Do you know you are behaving like a shameless creature, and doubly like a fool? Did you come out after me? or why are you here, and where were you going? By heaven, it is enough to drive a man mad to see a girl making an idiot of herself like this!"

Poor Innocent could not stand against this torrent of reproof. She shrank back into a corner, and cried and sobbed. It seemed to her that heaven and earth had risen up against her, now that Frederick "scolded" her too. She had done no harm. But what an evening, what a round of miserable adventures she had gone through! Her limbs were aching with fatigue, and her mind with fright and terror. He had seemed to her the very messenger of heaven for her deliverance. Her cry when she saw him was one of those outcries of pure joy which sound keen and sharp as if a pang were in them. Out of the darkness, the forlornness, the utter misery, he appeared to her like an angel. But when the angel began to scold her, poor Innocent, muddy and wretched, shrank up into her corner. For the first time a consciousness of her own foolishness came across her mind. How could he, so spotless and smooth as he was, touch or look at her, with mud on her dress, with her old cloak wet with the rain, and her hair hanging limp and damp upon her shoulders? Yes, she deserved to be scolded: she perceived this for perhaps the first time in her life.

"When you have done crying," said Frederick, still savage, "perhaps you will explain to me what ridiculous cause brought you to this plight. Have you run away entirely? Where were you going? What do you want! You little fool! They are far kinder to you at home than any one would be anywhere else. You would gain very little, I can tell you, by running away."

"I did not mean to run away," said Innocent, crying softly, as it were, under her breath.

"You will find no other people so foolish," said Frederick savagely. "What did you want? what were you thinking of? Good heavens! you are a girl, are you, and not a spirit of mischief? Fancy my dismay when I saw you—you, who ought to have been safe and sound at home, questioned by a policeman in the midst of a London crowd! Try and imagine how disgraceful such a thing is to yourself—how exasperating to me."

"Oh, Frederick!" cried the girl, overwhelmed by his reproaches, and roused into understanding by the sharpness of the pain to which she was subjected, "I did not mean it. Do not be angry: it was not my fault——"

"Not your fault!" he cried in his rage. "Good heavens! if it had not been that I was afraid you might get into some still more disgraceful scrape, I should have left you to your fate. The thought did go through my mind. If this were known, nobody would ever speak to you again; nobody would believe your excuses. Not your fault! What made you come out at all, away from home?"

"Oh, don't be angry," she cried piteously, and put out her trembling hand to touch his coat, to propitiate and pacify him with abject self-humiliation. By this time his passion had begun to wear itself out, but he would not give her any sign of forgiveness. When the cab reached the gate of the Elms, it was thrown open to them by all the servants in a body, who were searching about among the shrubbery with lights.

"Oh, here she is, with Mr. Frederick. I know'd she'd be found with Mr. Frederick," said one of the maids, whom Frederick overheard.

Mrs. Eastwood met them at the door, looking pale and frightened. "Oh, thank God, here she is at last!" she cried to Nelly, who was behind.

Innocent clutched tightly at Frederick's arm as she stepped down, bewildered and dazzled by the lights that flashed everywhere around her. He had scolded her cruelly, but yet she clung to him in preference to the women who had been so kind to her. He felt the implied compliment, even in the midst of his wrath.

"Yes, I have brought the little fool home," he cried loudly, that all might hear him. "Where do you think I found her? In the middle of the Brompton Road, with a crowd round, crying, and unable to tell where she came from. What were you thinking of, mother, to let such a child go out alone?"

"I! let her go out alone!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, astonished at the undeserved blame. "Are you mad, Frederick? I have been more unhappy about her than I can say. The gardener has gone out to look everywhere, and we have been all over the grounds with lanterns. But bring her in—bring her in. Thank God we have her safe at last!"

With the lights apparently flashing all round her, dazzling her

eyes, Innocent went in, half dragged by Frederick, to whom she kept clinging. He pushed her roughly into a chair, pulling away his arm. "There! let us see if you can give any account of your escapade," he said harshly.

The tones of his voice, his harsh words, sunk into poor Innocent's heart like stones sinking into water. She remembered nothing else afterwards, and the pain seemed something more than she could bear. She sat and gazed at them all, holding her old faded cloak round her closely, and showing the stains of mud on it and upon her black frock. Her hair fell limp to her neck: her poor little hat was pushed back from her head. The excitement and distress threw out, as nothing before had done, the peculiar beauty of her face, but a more forlorn figure could not have been seen. Mrs. Eastwood was more anxious and more compassionate than her son.

"How was it, Innocent?" she asked: "I am sure you could not mean any harm. Tell me where were you going? where had you been?"

The girl sat silent, like one under a spell, eager yet dumb, on the point of utterance. She seemed to struggle with some force which prevented her from speaking. She turned her eyes from one to another, eager, miserable—trying, it seemed, to tell her story—incapable of beginning. At last she surmounted the spell, and burst suddenly into wild tears.

"I did not mean it. I saw the church from the window—I thought it was like the Spina. Oh—h! it was not a church at all: it was some dreadful place. They tried to kill me, and then I fled—fled! and I did not know the way——"

"What is the Spina?" said Mrs. Eastwood, wondering. "You frighten her, Frederick, making those grimaces. Innocent, no one will be hard upon you. Tell me plainly; what sort of a dreadful place was it? Why did you go?"

The girl looked round her at them all, one after another. Why did she go? She did not really understand the question, but it seemed to drive her to that necessity for an answer which sometimes brings the truth from our lips, and sometimes calls up an involuntary fiction which appears like truth to other minds, and sometimes to that of the speaker. "I was—lonely," she said, after a long pause.

Mrs. Eastwood gave a cry of pain. She turned her back upon them all, and walked up and down the room two or three times with an agitation that no one understood. Then she came and stood by Innocent, and put one arm round her. "Oh, Nelly," she cried, "Nelly, this is our fault!"

It would be wrong to say that Nelly was less tender-hearted than her mother, except in so far as youth is always less considerate, less tolerant than experience; but on this occasion she stood unmoved, feeling more indignant than sorry. She, too, had made her essay at sympathy, and she had not got the better of its rejection. She

stood by without any particular demonstration, while by degrees some sort of account of the evening was got from her cousin. Innocent told them in broken words all that had happened to her. She shuddered as she described the groans. She was sure she had seen the gleam of the knives, and heard the steps approaching of the men who were going to kill her. This curious Italian version of a very commonplace incident puzzled the family greatly, to whose imaginations knives were quite strange and impossible things. When she had told her tale somehow, she sat, looking at them all, one after the other, with strained eyes, not knowing what they might do to her for the crime she seemed to have committed, without knowing it to be a crime. She did not catch the sense of what they said to each other, though her eyes followed every word, trying to divine it on the lips of the speaker.

"I was lonely," she repeated, with a curious mixture of wistful misery, and the childish cunning of the perception that she had made a successful stroke with these words before.

The result, so far as Innocent was concerned, was that she was taken tenderly up-stairs, and committed to the care of Alice, who put her to bed, and questioned her over again, making her own reflections on the adventure. Innocent cried herself to sleep, sobbing while drowsiness crept over her, and waking up to sob again. The groans of the old woman in the chapel possessed her brain, and the strange black desolation of the streets, which every time she dropped asleep seemed to enfold her again, frightening her back out of the world of dreams to feel for the first time the soothing of the firelight, and the kindly warmth and comfort of her little room. These, however, were but superficial tortures. The one which gave them their hold upon her, and which had indeed produced a sort of half awakening of her spiritual nature, was the terrible disappointment of being "scolded" by Frederick. She knew no more tragical word to use, even in her own mind. He had forsaken her. She dwelt upon the fact with an acute pang, almost like the birth-pang of the soul which had not yet come to life within her. Almost, but not altogether—for the impulses of that high and potent inspiration of pain died off, when they reached the intolerable point, into vague childish moaning over an unexpected unkindness. Her only moral standing-ground in this vague uncertain world had failed her—Frederick had scolded her. The two things sound very different, yet in the feverish and confused musings of this poor undeveloped nature they were the same.

The party in the drawing-room were moved by very different feelings. The young people could not understand their mother. She had been crying, with her head bent down into her hands. To Nelly the incident was disagreeable and annoying, but not tragic; *while to* Frederick it had become chiefly an occasion of fault-finding. *To think that it* was somebody's fault was a great relief to his *mind.*

"Why do you let her stray about as she likes? Why don't you make her stay in the room with you? Why don't you give her something to do? Surely there are people enough in the house to see that a child like that is not wandering about at her own will wherever she pleases?" he said.

This view of the subject relieved him from the indefinite uneasiness which had begun to steal into his mind as to his own sharp words to Innocent. He was quite right in using those sharp words. She must be made to see (he thought) that something more was required of her than to yield to every impulse—that she must learn, being a girl, to respect the limits which society draws around a girl's path from her earliest beginning. She ought to have known them by instinct; but as she did not know them it was necessary she should be taught, and the sooner and more effectually the better. But, besides this, it was good to have somebody at home to blame for her foolishness. If she had been properly watched it could not have happened. Why did not some one keep her in their eye? Why not force her to remain with the others, if force was necessary? Why not—? There was no end to Frederick's whys; everybody was wrong who had anything to do with the management of the girl; while he managed her, nothing of this sort had happened. But it was not in the nature of things that he could go on looking after a girl of sixteen—and the moment she got into the hands of the women, her natural guardians, this was the issue. It was just like women's way—they wanted to do men's work, and they would not take the trouble to do their own.

That Nelly should have accepted this challenge hotly and fiercely was natural enough; but Mrs. Eastwood took no notice. It was only when the discussion grew furious that she roused herself and interfered.

"Children," she said, in her usual words, but with a more serious tone than usual, "don't wrangle. It does not become you, Frederick, to speak against women who have brought you up, and done everything for you; and it is foolish of you, Nelly, to argue, as if it was a thing for argument. If Frederick thinks I am a fool, and you are a fool, seeing us every day as he does, and knowing all about us, what good will arguing do him?"

"I did not mean that, mother," said Frederick, momentarily ashamed of himself.

"You said it, then, my dear, which is a very common thing among men," said Mrs. Eastwood, "and curious when you come to think of it. But, as I say, talk will not change any one's opinion. And here is something very much more serious to call for our attention. Something must be done about Innocent. Her mother made me very unhappy when I was young. She was not affectionate either. She was secret; nobody could ever make sure what was going on in her mind. When she ran away and married Mr. Vane, none

of us had the least suspicion of what was going on. I am afraid of Innocent doing something of the same kind."

"Running away and marrying—some one?" asked Frederick. An ineffable smile of secret complacency came over the young man's face. He gave a short little laugh of pleased embarrassment. "I think you may feel yourself safe against any such danger. Running away—or, at least, marrying—requires two——"

Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly looked at each other with secret feminine indignation, thus relieving their minds; but the mother replied, with a composure which she was far from feeling,—

"There are more ways of going wrong than making a foolish marriage. That is very wrong, Heaven knows; when you consider how much the very character of the family and its standing in the world depends upon the wife whom a young man may marry in a sudden fancy——"

"If you are referring to me, mother," said Frederick, catching fire, "you may make yourself perfectly easy. I look upon Innocent as a mere child. It seems to me a kind of insult to suppose for a moment that I could be capable——"

"Of running away with Innocent?" said his mother, looking him calmly in the face. "Be comforted, Frederick; I never imagined that you were likely so to compromise yourself. The danger I warned you against was of a very different kind.—But we need not return to that. Nobody can say you have been too kind to her to-night."

"I am not sentimental," he cried, getting up from his chair, and glad of the excuse for being angry, and withdrawing from unpleasant discussion. He went off, whistling an opera air, to show his perfect indifference, and was heard next moment pitching coals on the fire in the library, and wheeling the chairs about violently, to get himself the most comfortable place. This Sunday night was not so peaceable as a Sunday night ought to be in a respectable English household, which strove to do its duty. Dick came in immediately after Frederick's withdrawal, with muddy boots, and rain on his rough coat, but his cheeks pink with the cold air outside, and the serenity of an easy mind in his good-natured countenance. Dick seldom wrangled, and never allowed any event to disturb him very deeply. His honest matter-of-fact character was always a comfort, whatever went wrong.

"So she has come back?" he said; "that's a blessing. I went as far as Piccadilly without seeing anything of her. I say, weren't they making a row in that little chapel in the road—groaning as if they'd groan their heads off. Had Innocent gone after Frederick, as the maids say? or where had she been?"

Dick was much amused when they told him the facts of the case, *and saw* great possibilities of laughter in the idea.

"*I say, what jolly fun!*" he cried—"thought they were going to

kill her? Oh, oh, oh! What a stupid I was not to go in. Poor little soul though, I hope you didn't scold her—not more than you could help, mamma! I suppose it's right to scold—to a certain point—but she's so scared and so bewildered."

"And you are my own good Dick," cried his mother, giving him a kiss, which the boy did not understand.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," he said, with a brightening of pleasure, "though hang me if I know why. Ain't I muddy, rather! You never saw such a night. Honest fog is a joke to it. Drizzle, drizzle for ever; and the sky is so low you could touch it. I'm glad she's in all right, and safe in bed; and I hope you didn't whip her. If I am to be up at seven to those dear mathematics," Dick added, making a face, "I suppose I had better go to bed too——"

"And don't forget to get up when you are called, dear," said Mrs. Eastwood; "and do work, there's a good boy. I am sure you have plenty of brains, if you will only take the trouble."

Dick shrugged his shoulders, as he went off cheerful after his long walk. I don't know that his brains were at all superabundant; and he was not fond of work; but after the clever and refined Frederick the very sight of this honest fellow, weighted to the ground as he was by the burden of the coming Exam., was a consolation to everybody belonging to him. The mother and daughter had a final consultation before they too left the drawing-room. There had to be beer ordered for the gardener, who came in much more overwhelmed by the fatigue of his bootless walk than Dick was, depressed about things in general, and taking a dark view of Innocent's prospects in particular.

"Gentlemen don't like to be followed about like that," he said oracularly, "no more nor I would myself. Women should know as their place is at 'ome, and make up their minds to it."

This, it is true, was said down-stairs to a sympathetic housemaid; but, being an old servant, the gardener felt that he might unfold his mind a little, even to his mistress.

"I'd give the young lady a word, mum," he said, strong in his own sense of injury, as having lost his Sunday evening's ease and leisure through her means. "I'd let her know, whatever may be furrin' ways, as this sort o' thing won't do—not in England. It ain't the thing for a young gell. In furrin' parts there's many ways as ain't like ours—so I'm told—dancing all over the place of Sundays, and that sort; but not to be hard upon her the first time, nor nothing violent, I'd jest give her a word—that it won't do, not here."

"You may be sure I will say all that is necessary," said Mrs. Eastwood, half laughing, half angry. "My niece went out to go to church, and went to the little chapel in the road, and got frightened, poor child. That is the whole matter."

"Ah, ma'am, you're a simple 'earted one," said the man, shaking

his head with a scepticism that no asseveration could have touched.

The maids, too, were of opinion that Mrs. Eastwood was a very simple 'earted one; though not where they themselves were concerned. She had not the same faith in their excuses as she seemed to put in this patent deception attempted by "the French girl," who was a likely one to get into trouble by going to church surely. The kitchen and all its dependencies laughed the idea to scorn, though, perhaps, respecting Innocent more for the cleverness and invention she had displayed in finding out such an excuse. But the story was laid up against her, with a fulness of detail and circumstance such as might have made an historian despair. How she followed Frederick to his dinner-party, and watched him through the window, and went after him to the club, was all known to the housemaid as particularly as if she had been there.

"And I hope he'll reward her, when he's free and can please hisself," said Jane in the kitchen, who was romantic.

"Get along with you," cried the cook. "Do you think gentlemen care for a chit like that?"

"And one as follows 'em about," said Susan solemnly, whose younger sister Jane was.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PHILOSOPHY FOR GIRLS.

THE result of this day's proceedings was not on the whole satisfactory to Frederick. If, as he, like the maids, felt assured, Innocent's escapade had been entirely on his own account, a despairing attempt to follow and be with him, such devotion, however flattering, was of an embarrassing character, and very likely to compromise him, however prudently and conscientiously he might struggle to take no undue advantage of her. Like the gardener, he felt that it would not do, and having also, like the gardener, very little confidence in his mother's severity, he determined to make the matter very clear to Innocent herself. Fortune favoured him so far in this virtuous intention that he found her alone in the breakfast-room next morning when he came down-stairs. Frederick was always late. This was one of the things that made Dick so angry; while he, unhappy boy, was hunted up at seven o'clock, Frederick came down to breakfast at ten, with an occasional mild remonstrance, *but no more*. Things were sent away to be kept hot for him; fresh *coffee had to be made*, and fresh rolls procured, and to everybody

this seemed the most natural thing in the world. He was always late, but he was later than usual on this particular day, which, being Monday, was an early day with the household. I need not enter into the reasons why Monday was an early day. Every lady who is my gentle reader, and who does her own housekeeping, will understand; and for the uninitiated it is well that they should learn to believe and tremble. It might be unwise of Mrs. Eastwood to leave Innocent alone in the room, but she was unaccustomed to the attitude of suspicion, and felt it dreadful to be obliged always to have her wits about her. Perhaps it was with the object of seeing Frederick, that Innocent, poor soul, lingered. She had been slightly, superficially touched by the kindness of her aunt to her the night before, and by the fact that no "scolding" had followed upon the offence; and she had for the first time offered to do something, no greater a business than arranging moss about some flower-pots, for which purpose it was, nominally, that she was left in the dining-room. But another feeling much more strong possessed her. Frederick had "scolded" her. He had beaten her down when she was very low with angry words, and consequently she had a wistful desire to be forgiven by him; to know how he would speak to her next time; if there was any hope for her, or if all was over for ever. The others had slightly moved the surface of her mind by their kindness, but Frederick, by his unkindness, had touched her much more deeply, almost to the point of revolution. All her senses were keenly awake to indications of his coming. She heard his step a dozen times before it really came; she wondered vaguely what he would say, how he would look; she was eager, and anxious, and tremulous as she had never been before. Her interest in him, instead of being checked, was doubled. This was what his unkindness had done.

When he came into the room first he took no notice of her. He went and poked the fire, and then he examined the table, and rang the bell for his hot coffee. Then only he said, "Good morning, Innocent." He did not hold out his hand. Sometimes he would stroke her hair, or pat her head, or give her some token of affectionateness. To-day he did not even hold out his hand. "What are you doing?" was his next question, for it was odd to see her doing anything. She made haste to answer, heaping up the moss with such tremulous fingers that it fell down again in a mass.

"I am doing this—for Nelly."

"That is right," he said more cheerfully. "Never mind what nonsense you do so long as you make it up with them. I told you the other day you would never get on till you learned to make friends of your own sex."

Innocent made no answer. What could she say? A general observation like this was like Latin and Greek to her. She looked at him, and that was all. By this time Brownlow had brought in the

coffee, and he had begun to eat his breakfast. It is a comfortable sort of thing to do on a chilly spring morning, with a pleasant fire on one side of you, and sunshine and crocuses on the other, looking in through the window. This mollified Frederick in spite of himself.

"That was a very foolish business of yours last night," he said, but in a softer tone; "you must not do such things. I daresay it is dull for you here. You don't enter into their life, and there is nothing of your own to interest you. But still you know girls have to put up with that. It may be hard, but still they have to do it. I suppose when you are married it is expected that you should have it made up to you. At least this is the ordinary state of affairs; girls have to put up with it. I cannot take you to my club, you know, or to the—other places—where I go."

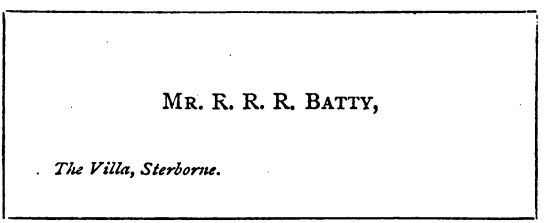
"I did not want you to take me," said Innocent, surprised.

"I am glad to hear it," said Frederick. He did not believe her any more than the maids did. He smiled a little within himself at the idea that she was yielding to a conviction of the necessity for pretence. He was half amused by this, and rather more flattered than before. She must be beginning, he thought, to feel half a woman, to understand that she must not say and do everything that came into her head, with the freedom permitted to himself, for instance. "I was going to speak to you very seriously," he went on, "but as you are trying to make friends with the others, and to do better, I will not worry you. What I said is for your good, Innocent—which is not to be obtained by your usual way of doing what pleases yourself, but by yielding to others and trying to be content with what is thought good for you. This may be hard—(N.B. Frederick certainly had never tried)—but it is the only way for a girl to get on. You must manage somehow to make friends of your own sex."

Frederick dwelt upon this aphorism with some pride. He felt that it was original, and did him credit, and its wisdom gratified him. On the whole he was pleased with himself while he delivered his little address. Instead of taking advantage of the girl's fondness for him, as some men might have done, he was doing his utmost to lead her in the paths of virtue. Whether she or any one else appreciated it, he at least did. He was so far softened by the sense of his own goodness, that when he had finished breakfast, he put his hand kindly upon her shoulder while he said "Good morning," and finding her face near his and turned towards him, kissed her for the first time with much benevolence of feeling. Innocent's face grew suddenly red under this salute. She was not angry, she was not pleased—she did not know how to receive it; but a sudden flush of colour answered to the light and somewhat careless touch. *Frederick himself* went off half laughing, half confused. He said *to himself that the girl* was growing into a woman, that she had

developed very quickly since he had brought her home. "I must mind what I am about," he said to himself. Perhaps, on the whole, in giving this kiss he had gone just a very little too far. And Frederick felt that there was a deep responsibility upon him. He must not delude his cousin with hopes that never could be realized.

With this feeling in his mind he went off to the office, a little wondering and alarmed lest the story of his wonderful encounter last night in the street should have already reached it. But nobody showed any signs of knowing this curious incident, and though Frederick was slightly defiant and ready to stand on his defence at the slightest provocation, no such provocation was offered him. I do not know how it is that when something disagreeable is about to happen to us, we so often have this preparation of looking for something else, perhaps equally disagreeable, which does not come. Frederick was quite prepared to be assailed about the mysterious female figure which he had rescued from the midst of the crowd, and which he had driven off with, without a word of explanation, under the very eyes of his astonished friend. He looked out a little nervously for every new-comer who entered the place, fancying that his last night's companion would appear. No one came, however, until about three o'clock, just before the hour for leaving, on the verge, as it were, of security. He was just beginning to tell himself that all was safe, that his perils were over for the day, and that a joke of this kind could not survive twenty-four hours, when the porter brought him the card of a visitor, who awaited him downstairs. Frederick took it unsuspicious, for at that moment he feared only Egerton, his friend of last night. For a moment he gazed in wonder, which rapidly turned into consternation, at the card. This was the inscription upon it :—



The name of a second-rate hotel in London was written in pencil across the card. Frederick held it in his hand, and gazed at it, feeling his features stiffen as if it had been the Gorgon herself whose countenance he was contemplating. I am afraid, that having heard nothing of Mr. Batty for some weeks, he had forgotten the benevolent stranger who had interposed to save him when he was almost

in extremity. Mrs. Eastwood had presented her son with a bank-note or two by way of paying the expenses of that illness of his, which had detained him compulsorily in Paris, and put him, no doubt, to a great deal of extra expense; but as there was not sufficient to pay Batty, and Batty did not ask for payment, Frederick had disposed of these very comfortably in other ways.

"Shall I show the gentleman up?" said the porter, while the young man gazed horror-stricken at the card.

"Show him into Mr. Jones's room," said Frederick, with an effort. Jones was absent on leave, and his room was a safe place, where a disagreeable visitor might be encountered without any more harm than was involved in the sight of him. Then he did what he could to prepare himself for the meeting. He buttoned his coat, and took his hat and cane by way of showing that he was about to leave the office, and had little time for colloquy. He tried to make up in his mind in desperate haste what to say about the money, and he tried at the same time, the one attempt mingling with the other, and confusing it, to make up some story for home, to elicit a few more of those most necessary banknotes. It is dreadful to think how many well-looking, faultlessly-dressed young gentlemen in the public service like Frederick Eastwood, looking self-possessed enough for any emergency, and superior enough to crush into insignificance the greater part of their fellow-creatures, should be secretly occupied in making up hasty and clumsy inventions like this, to stave off the paying of money, or to coax it out of well-guarded pockets. Frederick walked along the passage as slowly as he could towards Jones's room. Wretched little Innocent! it was all her fault that he had been seduced into this expenditure, and put in this man's power. Frederick remembered vividly how objectionable the man's loud voice and coarse geniality had been to him when, with a bad headache and a sinking heart, he sat and studied "Bradshaw," and counted out his last francs in the Paris hotel. What must he seem now, when he no longer had it in his power to be of use, and appeared only in the guise of a creditor, always an odious character to appear in? Frederick walked into the room at last with something of the feelings which must move the poor wretch who marches to his execution. Could he have followed his own will, ropes would not have sufficed to drag him whither his reluctant feet now paced with that appearance of voluntary motion which is often such a miserable pretence. To how many places do we go thus, pretending to do it of our own free will—to balls and dinner parties, and other festive meetings, to our own marriage sometimes, to every kind of act in which we are—heaven help us!—free agents, as the jargon goes. Frederick's feelings were doubtless exaggerated, for, after all, he owed this man not much over fifty pounds. But then *the man* could tell things of him which he fondly hoped were *known to no one in his* own sphere — as if there was anything

in any man's life of a disagreeable or disgraceful kind which was not known!

Batty met him with the greatest cordiality, with a large red dirty hand outstretched, and smiles of genial welcome.

"Delighted to see you looking so well, sir," he said; "quite picked up again, eh, after your little spree abroad? Glad of that. You young men have no moderation. A steady old stager like me knows just how far to go. But you're always on ahead, you young 'uns. I came up to town Saturday, Mr. Eastwood, to look about me a bit, and see how the world was going on, and I've lost no time in looking you up."

"Much obliged, I'm sure," said poor Frederick, shivering. "I ought to have written to you about that money," and he went up to the smouldering fire and poked it violently. "How cold the weather keeps for this time of the year!"

"It do, to be sure," said Batty. "But, Mr. Frederick, if you'll give me the privilege of calling you so—which comes natural, seeing I have been among Eastwoods all my life—I ain't come here prying about the money. I'm above such mean tricks. When I can be of service to a gentleman I'm proud, and so long as I'm used honourable, and treated like a friend, hang me if I'd dun any man. It ain't the money, sir, but feeling that has brought me here."

"I am sure you are very good," said Frederick stiffly, "but however that may be on your part, Mr. Batty, I am aware that I ought to have written to you about what is really a debt of honour——"

"Hush, hush!" said Batty, "you make me feel like a shopman, I declare you do. I've taken the liberty to write where we're staying, Mr. Eastwood, on my card, and if you'll eat a bit of dinner with us at seven, sharp, you'll do us honour, sir. I've got my daughter with me. It ain't often I can get her up to town, and when I do I like to show her a bit of the world. If you'd ever been down our way with your cousin, the baronet, you'd have heard of my girl. She's known as the Flower of Sterborne, down our way. I don't say but what you've great beauties about London, greater beauties than our country lasses; but I'm proud of my 'Manda. I'm not in the way of asking my friends when she's with me, but an Eastwood ain't like any one else, at least not to her and me."

"I am sure you are very good," said Frederick, using the same words again, and stiffening more and more. A rapid calculation had run through his mind while Batty was speaking. Should he say he was engaged, or should he keep the monster in good-humour by enduring a dinner in his company? Was it worth his while, since the monster appeared so amiable by nature, to take all this trouble to keep him in good-humour? These, and various other branches of the same question, went through his mind, retarding his reply. He did not personally know his cousin the baronet, though Frederick was fully aware of the importance to a young man in

society of such a relative, and if the man really knew the Eastwoods, his power of telling a disagreeable story was infinitely enhanced. On the whole, it seemed to Frederick that it was better to humour him, to accept his invitation, and trust to the support of Providence to get through the evening. After all, it was seeing "life" as much at least as many other ways which he had taken in his day for that purpose, and which his friends were constantly employing. When he had got rid of Batty he made up, in case of any chance discovery, an explanation of what he was about to do. "I am going to dine with an old fellow whom I picked up in Paris the other day," he said to the people in the office. "A genuine John Bull, ready for anything, but not knowing a word of any language but his own. He turned out to be some sort of rural hanger-on of my cousin Sir Geoffrey, and out of gratitude he is going to give me a dinner. I expect some fun."

"I wonder what that elaborate explanation means?" one of his audience said to another. "Eastwood is always up to some mischief when he's explanatory. This time I wonder what it can be. I don't believe he knows his cousin Sir Geoffrey from Adam."

"If he did, he's a poor wretch in the hands of the Jews, and not much good to any one," said the other; but perhaps this was because neither of the two had a cousin in the baronetage, which makes a difference in a man's feelings.

Innocent was in her usual place in the little window by the door when Frederick went home that evening. The sight of her recalled to him all the wise determinations of the morning, and he was annoyed to see how little fruit they had borne. Really, he felt, this must be put a stop to. He made a sign to her to come out to him, and went round the side of the house into the garden. It was a cold and unfavourable spring, scarcely warmer now, though it was the end of March, than it had been in February, but the days had grown longer, and Frederick's return was now generally in daylight.

"I wanted to say to you, Innocent, that you must give up this habit of watching for me," he said. "No doubt it is very kind of you. I did not mind it so much when you were quite a stranger, and of course knew me best—and when the nights were darker you were not so much noticed at the window. But now you must recollect it is quite light, and a great girl like you is remarked. People will say unkind things about you. They will say, for instance, that you are fond—of me."

"I am fond of you," she said, with the tears in her eyes.

"That is all very well," said Frederick, "but we must not go too far. Don't let me see you there again. Girls ought to know these things without being told. You are a great girl, almost grown up: and you know the others now almost as well as you know me. I *should* have told you this in the morning, but I forgot. Altogether, *Innocent, there must* be a change. I had thought your own sense

would teach you—and I thought that what I said this morning—— But you compel me to speak plainly," said Frederick, seeing the face of his mother looking out from the drawing-room, and feeling inspired by the thought that he would himself be called to question for this interview with Innocent. He was determined, however, at whatever risk to "put a stop to this sort of thing." And the annoyance to which he had himself been subjected gave him strength and courage. It seems only right that we should have compensation, and afflict others when trouble has come to ourselves.

Innocent made no answer. She walked silently by his side, overcome by the bitterness of this sudden onslaught when she had expected quite the reverse. Poor child, her earliest training was all emotional; the severest kind of mental discipline. When he made her a sign to come out to him, she had thought he meant to be kinder, more affectionate than usual, more like what he used to be when he travelled with her, and cared for her in everything. How quickly, how gladly she had rushed out, leaving the door open behind her, as Brownlow remembered long afterwards. And to find that all her pleasant expectations were to end in a new and utterly unprovoked *accès* of scolding! She tried hard not to cry, her pride being hurt at last, but the large tears dropped down her cheeks, as she went silently along the walk by his side. She put up her hand furtively to dash them away. She turned her head from him that he might not see them. Was it the same Frederick who had kissed her before he went out, who had always been good to her, except last night? But she could not say anything either in defence or submission. She was too deeply and cruelly disappointed to have any power of speech left.

"You won't give in?" said Frederick. "You are just like all women. You will never allow you are in the wrong. When I come home, fretted and vexed from the world," continued the young man, taking a high tone, "and hoping to have a little repose and comfort at home, you begin to worry me from the first moment you catch sight of me. I declare it is hard; a man who has always tried to do his duty at home—and instead of finding it a refuge from the troubles of life——"

This speech was perfectly unintelligible to Innocent. She looked up at him with vague surprise, being quite unaware, poor child, of the troubles of life from which Frederick escaped with the hope of finding comfort at home. He had fallen without thinking into the ordinary and conventional manner in which manhood indignant addresses its womankind. He pulled himself up suddenly with a "pshaw!" of disgust, which could only be addressed to himself.

"I mean you must put a stop to all this nonsense," he said abruptly. "Make yourself happy somehow. Do as other people do. Don't sit and mope in a corner and gaze at me, and don't watch for me any more at that window. If you do, I shall be

horribly vexed. There now, run in and think no more of it. I don't mean to be cross; but you must remember, Innocent," he concluded with great emphasis, "you must remember that what you have got to do is to please, not yourself, but me."

Innocent received this first lesson in the female necessity of self-renunciation in silence, taking it in with her eyes as well as her ears. She kept looking at him, in the dulness of her perception, wondering if there was something more to follow; but nothing followed. Then she said "Yes" vaguely, and they went in together, he to the drawing-room, where he had his mother to encounter, she to the schoolroom, high up in the roof, which she had taken possession of to sit and dream in. Girls seldom have their lesson so very plainly put forth to them in words, but perhaps Innocent's undeveloped mind required it. "What you have to do is to please, not yourself, but me!" She pondered the words, and got to the length of mastering their meaning without any criticism. Such plainspeaking has in it a certain sublimity, surmounting all secondary shades of meaning, and penetrating into the simplest soul. She got it by heart, seated on her window-ledge, looking out upon the little chapel, which once more had caught something of the aspect of the church of the Spina. "Not yourself, but me; not yourself, but me!" Thus Innocent got her first great lesson by heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FLOWER OF STERBORNE.

I DO not know if any prevision of the fate which was about to befall him was in Frederick's mind on that eventful night. He had a few words with his mother, which were not altogether friendly, ere he went to dress, for Mrs. Eastwood objected to the private walk and talk with Innocent, which seemed to her to be done in defiance of her warning and request.

"Ask her what I said to her, if you don't trust me," Frederick had said in high dudgeon, before he went to prepare himself for Mr. Batty's entertainment; and this encounter excited him, and gave him a perverse inclination to enjoy himself with the host whom he felt would be so highly disapproved of by his family. I don't think he let his imagination dwell at all on the fact that there was a third person to be present, or that this was a woman and a "beauty." The greatest beauty in the world being Mr. Batty's daughter could be of little importance to an Eastwood. He went his way to *Batty's* hotel with his head full of many thoughts, but totally indifferent to this one. He thought it was immensely impudent of the

fellow to ask him, that it was rather hard upon himself to be obliged to go, that it would be amusing to see how fellows of that sort dined and conducted themselves generally, along with a variety of other reflections equally superficial; but he never thought of the Flower of Sterborne, nor of the special effect she might be likely to produce on a young man suddenly presented to her. The hotel was not one of those seeming humble and quiet establishments, where princes and millionaires abound; it was more pretentious and less expensive, but yet dear enough to frighten any moderate soul out of London. Frederick was shown into a small dining-room, prepared for a small party. He saw with some relief that there were but three places, and took his seat very easily and without ceremony in front of the fire, with the *Times*, which was lying on a table. He scarcely noticed the door open; when it did open it would no doubt be Batty, who was not shy, and would soon make his presence known. Frederick read on, without looking behind him. Until he became suddenly aware of a rustling and subdued movement, and a slight air moved his paper as if some one had passed behind him. Startled by this, and somewhat ashamed of his own easy indifference, he started suddenly to his feet, and turned round. He never forgot all his life the sight that met his eyes. Standing behind his chair was (he thought) the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The arch look with which she had been contemplating his unconcern was still in her face. She was tall, almost as tall as himself, and ample, a fully-developed and splendid piece of flesh and blood, not so warm or so full-blown as Rubens, but something approaching that school of art. She was of the class of beauty which has come to be distinctive of the present period, though I cannot tell why. Her hair, I need not say, was golden; her complexion dazzling. She was like the sun, almost as brilliant, in her mingling of tints, her snow-white, and rose-red, and glittering glory of hair. The sight of her was too much for weak vision. It dazzled and brought water to the eyes of the rash and feeble beholder. If you could have calmly examined her features, without regard to that soft glow and glory of colour, and texture, and roundness, and life, it is possible that you might have found them to be not at all perfect; but this not one spectator in a hundred had coolness enough to do. Her eyes were hazel; they ought to have been blue, according to all rules; but it seemed part of her character, and the wilfulness which was its chief point, that she should have eyes, which, beautiful as they were, did not quite "go with" her face. There are many kinds of hazel eyes; it is the most changeful, the most capricious of colours. I have seen it turn to gold in a certain pair of orbs I wot of, showing like light itself in the light. I have seen it melt into the softest liquid grey; but there is a kind of hazel eye, very bright, very splendid, in which there is hung a subtle little danger-signal to all mankind. These are the eyes that have a

spark of red in them, flashing out now and then from the warm, translucent brown, a spark which tells of temper, of passion, of headstrong will, and impulse. 'Manda Batty had these eyes. They were lamps of light, and it seemed to the looker-on, if any one remarked it at all, that this fiery gleam was necessary to give them character, and keep them from losing their due importance in the brilliant and sweet glow of colour that surrounded them. This, if it really was, as I think, an indication of danger, was the only one. At this moment her face was full of suppressed laughter. She had a finger lifted to her lip like a statue of Silence, but how unlike a statue of Silence was she otherwise! or, indeed, a statue of anything; everything about her was warm and soft, breathing a lavish life. When Frederick turned round upon her so suddenly the laughter in her face burst forth. Perhaps it was louder and more uncultivated than if she had been, as people say, a lady. She threw herself down in a chair, and laughed till the water sparkled on her pretty eyelashes, and she put her hands to her waist with such a rendering of "Laughter holding both his sides" as never entered into any painter's imagination. "Oh," she cried, "I shall die of laughing; come and stop me, come, papa."

It struck Frederick with a shock of surprise and pain when Mr. Batty came in by another door, also inarticulate with laughter. The idea of this wonderful creature being Batty's daughter appalled and struck him dumb. Not to say that he was very deeply embarrassed by the situation altogether, by the laughter of the new-comer, and his own semi-ridiculous attitude—her beauty had struck him at once with one of those impressions which are not to be shaken off, which count, slight and superficial as is often the instrument, among the great things of life. Never before had Frederick been so profoundly moved. He did not understand the effect, nor what it meant. He ceased to be himself for the moment, and became the subject of a strange and subtle experiment, which stamped her reflection upon him. No, he was not himself; he was a mirror of her, a sensitive plate, upon which that sudden light had painted her likeness. These may seem fantastic similes, but I know no other that would convey what I mean. I suppose it was what we, with our limited powers of expression, call love at first sight. It was certainly adoration at first sight, which is a different thing.

"Well, Mr. Eastwood, here's my wild girl making fun of us both," said Batty, "without even giving me a chance of introducing you. 'Manda, this is Mr. Eastwood, as of course you have found out."

"Don't say Mr. Eastwood, papa."

"No, you're right. Mr. Frederick, that's what I mean, and a deal nicer a gentleman," said the father. "You see, Mr. Frederick, 'Manda has been, so to speak, brought up with nothing but Eastwoods. All the young 'uns, from Sir Geoffrey downwards, rode into Sterborne on their ponies to have their lessons with our old

curate, and 'Manda being his prime favourite, and partly brought up with him——"

"You don't suppose, papa, that any one but ourselves cares for all these details. Pray forgive me for laughing at you," said Miss Amanda, turning to Frederick, "you were so comfortable and so much at your ease reading your *Times*. What can gentlemen find in the *Times* always, morning, noon, and night? Papa is never done with his paper; first there is one thing, then another. I suppose you had been reading it all the morning, Mr. Frederick Eastwood, and the first thing you do is to take it up here."

"I did not know there was any one observing me," said Frederick, standing confused and humble before her. He who was very lofty and dignified to his mother and sister, was ready to be abject to Amanda. He listened to her with absolute reverence, though all that she had to say was commonplace enough. When he was placed beside her at dinner, and found himself at liberty to look at her and listen to her undisturbed, it seemed to Frederick that he had never been so blessed. He took in all her chatter without losing a word. Miss Batty was in full dress. Those were the days when English ladies were supposed always to appear with bare shoulders in the evening, and her beautiful shoulders and arms were bare. Her dress was blue, with a long train, which was considerably in her way. If there was anything wanting in her it was this—she moved about in a manner that did not suit the dignity of her beauty; her movements were quick, jerky, and without grace; she bustled like a notable housewife rather than a fine lady. Perhaps if her dress had not been much too fine for the occasion this would have been less remarkable, but as it was, Frederick's dream was disturbed a little when she jumped up to help herself. "Oh, I can't sit and wait if I want a bit of bread till the servant comes," she cried. Frederick did not like the words, nor the tone of them, but she was lovelier than ever when she said them. Thus he did not lose his senses instantly, or suppose that everything that fell from her lips was divine. But his admiration, or adoration, mastered all his criticism and swept away his good sense. What she said might be foolish or flippant, but how she said it was heavenly. He could not take his eyes from her. He made what effort he could to keep up the ordinary decorum, and look as if he were capable of eating, and drinking, and talking, as he had been the day before, but the effort was very little successful. Miss Amanda saw her victory, and almost disdained it, it was so easy; and her father saw it, and was satisfied.

"Now take me to the play," she said, when dinner was over. "It isn't often I am in town, and I mean to enjoy myself. Oh, we may be late, but it does not matter. If it is only for the after-piece I am determined to go."

"Was there ever so imperious a girl?" cried her father. "You

ought to remember, 'Manda, here is Mr. Eastwood. You can't send away a gentleman that has but just eaten his dinner."

"He can come too," said Amanda. "I like to have two gentlemen. There is always plenty for two gentlemen to do. Won't you come, Mr. Frederick Eastwood? But anyhow I must go," she continued, turning to her father, who was almost as abject in his devotion as Frederick was. Had she been anything short of perfection Frederick would have hesitated much before he consented to show himself in public with Mr. Batty and his daughter; indeed, the possibility of such a thing would have driven him frantic. But now he had no such thoughts. If he hesitated it was but to calculate what was going on in the theatrical world; what there was worthy to be seen by her. He was not much of a theatre-goer, but he knew what was being played, and where. He suggested one or two of what were supposed to be the best plays; but she put him down quite calmly. She had already decided that she was going to see one of the sensational pieces of the day, a drama (I do not know it, I may be doing it injustice) the chief point in which was the terrific situation of the hero or heroine, who was bound down on the line of a railway when the train was coming. It was this lofty representation which she had set her heart on seeing. Frederick handed her into the cab which was immediately sent for. He sat by her in it; he breathed in the atmosphere of "Ess. bouquet" which surrounded her. Now and then he thought, with a glimmer of horror, of meeting somebody whom he knew; but his mind was only at intervals sufficiently free to harbour this thought. It was, however, with a certain fright that he found himself in the stage-box, which it appeared had been provided beforehand for Miss Amanda's pleasure. "I prefer a box," she said to Frederick, "here one can be comfortable, and papa if he likes can fall asleep in a comfortable chair; but I can't understand a lady making herself happy down there." She pointed to the stalls, where Frederick was too happy not to be. There was, of course, somebody he knew in the second row, who found him out he feared in the dignity of his box, where Miss Amanda had no idea of hiding herself. "She objected to her gentlemen," she said, "taking refuge behind a curtain," and she did no such injustice to her own beauty as to conceal it. She dropped her cloak from her shoulders, and gave the house all the benefit; and she kept calling Frederick's attention to one thing and another, insisting that he should crane his neck round the corner to look at this or that. Her beauty and her dress and evident willingness to be admired drew many eyes, and Frederick felt that he had a share in the *succès* which he could very well have dispensed with. He had experienced a good many adventures, but very few like this. He had always *been very* respectable under the eyes of the world; to be sure, he *was quite respectable* now; there was no fault to be found with the

party—his beautiful companion, indeed, was something quite new, and not very much used to her present position; but there was nothing wrong in that. Nevertheless Frederick felt that there was something to pay for the strange confusion of blessedness in which he seemed to have lost himself. He felt this by intervals, and he kept as much as he could behind the curtains, behind *her*. She was perfectly willing to occupy the centre of the box, to rain down influence, to be seen and admired. "Mr. Eastwood, I wish you would not keep behind me. Do let people see that I have some one to take care of me. Papa has gone to sleep, of course," said the beauty, and she turned round upon Frederick with such a look that he remembered nothing any more but her loveliness, and the delight of being near her. She chattered through all the play, and he listened. She said a great deal that was silly, and some things that were slightly vulgar, and he noted them, yet was not less subjugated by a spell which was beyond resistance. I cannot be supposed to understand this, nor to explain it. In such matters I can only record facts. He was not under the delusion that she was a lofty, or noble, or refined being, though she was Batty's daughter. He presumed that she was Batty's daughter heart and soul; made of the same *pâte*, full of the same thoughts. She was "not a lady," beautiful, splendid, and well-dressed as she was; the humble, little snub-nosed girl in the stalls below who looked up at this vision of loveliness with a girl's admiration had something which all the wealth of the Indies could not have given to Miss Amanda. And Frederick Eastwood saw this quite plainly, yet fell in love, or in madness, exactly as if he had not seen it. The feeling, such as it was, was too genuine to make him capable of many words; but he did his best to amuse her, and he listened to all she said, which was a very good way of pleasing this young woman.

"I hope you mean to stay in town for some time," he said, in one of the pauses of her abundant talk.

"Not very long," said Miss 'Manda. "Papa likes to live well, and to do things in the best sort of way; so he spends a deal of money, and that can't last long. Our hotel isn't like Mivart's, and that sort of thing: but it is dreadfully dear. We spend as much as—oh, I couldn't venture to tell you how much we spend a day. Papa likes to have everything of the best, and so do I."

"And so you ought," said Frederick, adoring. "Pardon me if I am saying too much."

"Oh, you are not saying very much, Mr. Eastwood. It is I that am talking," said Amanda, "and as for our staying long here, that does not much matter, for papa wants you to come to Sterborne. He has been talking of it ever since he came back from Paris. What did you do to him to make him take such a fancy to you? We don't

think the other Eastwoods behaved very nicely to us, and ever since he met with you papa has been telling me of all your good qualities. You have put a spell upon him, I think."

"He is very good, I am sure," said Frederick, stiffening in spite of himself.

"Oh, I know," said Amanda, with a toss of her head. "We are not so fine as you are, we don't visit with county people, nor that sort of thing. But we have plenty of people come to see us who are better off than the Eastwoods, and better blood, too, so you need not be afraid. Papa has dealings with the very best. We don't like to be slighted," said the beauty, with a gleam of that red light from her beautiful eyes; "and when people put on airs, like your cousin has done, it sets papa's back up. That was why we went against Sir Geoffrey at the election. But I hope you will come, Mr. Eastwood; papa took such a fancy to you."

"I have just been away from the office for a month. I fear I shall not have leisure again for some time," said Frederick, feeling that an invitation from Batty was to be resisted, even when conveyed by such lovely lips.

"How hideous it must be not to be one's own master; to have to ask for 'leave' like a servant," cried 'Manda with a laugh; which speech set all Frederick's nerves ajar, and almost released him from the syren. He withdrew into the shade of the curtains, and drew to him all the succour of his pride.

"Yes, it is a pitiful position," he said, with an angry laugh; "but I may comfort myself that a great many people share it with me. Do you know I am afraid I must leave you. This performance is endless, and rather dull."

"Upon my word!" cried Miss Batty, "you are free-spoken, Mr. Frederick. To tell a lady you are dull when she is doing her best to amuse you!"

"Pardon me, I spoke of the performance."

"Oh, I don't care much for the performance," said Amanda, with a beaming smile. "I like the lights and the music, and the feeling of being out in the world. But you wouldn't go off, and leave me—with papa asleep, and no one to talk to?"

"I have an engagement—at my club."

"Oh, if you wish to go away, Mr. Eastwood——" The beauty turned away pouting, turning her lovely shoulders upon him, and tossing her beautiful head. Frederick had risen partly in the liveliness of personal offence, partly with an impulse of prudence, to escape while he might. But his heart failed him when he saw the averted head, the resentful movement. Batty dozed peacefully in his chair, interfering with no one. And something tugged at the unfortunate young man, who stood undecided whether to fly or to stay. *To leave* a lovely creature like this, the most beautiful woman *he had ever seen, alone,* without any one to amuse her: to leave the

place vacant which a hundred no doubt would give their ears for! What harm could it do him to stay? It was pleasant to spend an hour or two by the side of anything so pretty. Come of it—what could come of it? It was an accidental delight entirely, without connexion with the rest of his life; an isolated event, without either origin or issue. Why should not he like others enjoy himself for the moment? While he was thus hesitating Amanda turned her head round with a sudden provoking glance. "Oh, have you not gone yet?" she asked. Frederick felt, as it were, on his knees before her.

"Must I go? have I proved so unworthy of my privilege?" he cried humbly, taking his seat with deprecating looks. Miss Batty did not wish him to go, and said so freely, with unflattering plainness of speech.

"I should be left to listen to papa's snores, which I can hear at home," she said. "I always prefer some one to talk to. I daresay, however, I should not have been left long by myself, for there is Lord Hunterston down below in those horrid stalls looking up. He is trying to catch my eye. No; I don't care to have too many. I shan't see him as long as you stay."

"Then I shall stay for ever," said Frederick, inspired by that touch of rivalship. Lord Hunterston, however, did manage to find his way up to the box, whether by Miss 'Manda's permission or not, and Frederick grew stiff and resentful while the other foolish youth paid his homage. Lord Hunterston pricked him into double eagerness, and sent all the suggestions of prudence to the winds. Amanda proved herself thoroughly equal to the occasion. She kept the two young men in hand with perfect skill, though she allowed herself to be slightly insolent to Frederick, referring again to the "leave" without which he could not budge. This time, however, the reference did not make him angry, but only impressed him with the fact that his admiration was nothing to her, and that every step of vantage-ground would have to be fought for, and held with the exercise of all his powers. He felt himself pitted against not Lord Hunterston only, but all the world. It seemed impossible to imagine that this syren, who had conquered himself by a glance, should not attract everybody that had the happiness of approaching her. Terror, jealousy, and pride, all came in to aid the strongest passion of all, which had already taken possession of him—terror of losing her, jealousy of everybody who looked at her, and all the *amour propre* and determination to elevate himself over the heads of his rivals that could lend warmth to a young man's determination. No prize is fully estimated until the sense that it will be hotly contested bursts upon the competitor's mind. Frederick grew half wild when the time came for him to leave the theatre. He secured her arm to lead her down-stairs, but only by dint of having all his wits about him, and taking his rival unawares. And then he was dismissed at the cab door, with all his nerves tingling, his heart beating, his whole

frame in a ferment. He walked home all the way, following the path which her vehicle, so ignoble, and unfit for her to enter, must have taken; he passed under the windows he supposed to be hers. In short, he did everything that a foolish young man, mad with sudden excitement, and what is called passion, is expected to do, and worked himself into a higher and higher strain of excitement, as with his head full of thoughts of her he made his way home, longing impatiently for the morning, when he might see her again.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT IT IS TO BE "IN LOVE."

THE story of such sudden passions as this, which had come upon Frederick Eastwood, are common enough and well known. Love is a subject which concerns and interests the whole world, and though there is not much that is novel to be said about it, it is the event or accident in life of which the gentle reader never tires. Let not that kind listener be shocked if I call it an accident. Sometimes it is the influence which shapes our lives, but sometimes, also, it is so slight an episode that we are disposed to smile or to sneer at the prevailing human prejudice which makes it the chief centre of existence in all song and story. A pure and genuine love, however, has something of attraction in it for every creature. It recalls the most delicious moments of life, those in which the dream of perfect happiness, never to be fully realized, is forming in the youthful imagination, and all heaven and earth thrills and quickens with visionary hopes and aspirations; or it suggests, more sweetly and more vaguely even than those dreams themselves, the visions that are to come. The ignoble love which it is my evil fortune to have now in hand, would, no doubt, could I enter into it, recall its own ignoble yet exciting memories to the minds which are capable of such feelings. Frederick Eastwood scarcely slept all night, and when he did drop into a feverish doze, the image of Miss 'Manda, her golden hair dropping warm and bright upon her beautiful shoulders, the soft rose-white of her hand supporting the milky rose of her cheek, the curves of her face, the splendour and glow of beauty about her, haunted his dreams. Better visions, I hope, haunt the pillows of most lovers, but this was how Frederick loved, or rather how he fell into passion and frenzy, suddenly, without warning or thought, over the attractions of Mr. Batty's daughter, *whom the day* before he would have thought quite beneath his *lightest thought.* Thus Love, even when of the least worthy kind,

laughs at prejudice and class distinctions, and at all those conventional restraints which are stronger than the suggestions of wisdom. I do not think that any generous or exalted emotion would have led Frederick Eastwood to commit himself, to depart from what he thought becoming to his own elevated position and character; and this being the case, there may be a certain human satisfaction in the thought that something does exist which is capable of plucking the intellectualist from his eminence, and the man of social pretence from his position, as well as the prince from his throne. Love, that conquers all things, conquers in this way even the predominant influence of self. Frederick for once was superior to that determined adherence to his own will and pleasure which had accompanied him through his whole life. His first thought in the morning was for her. He got up earlier than usual, though he had been late on the previous night. He had no wish to sleep; it was sweeter to wander about the garden in the morning sunshine and think of her, which was a proceeding which filled the family with consternation. When he was discovered at the breakfast-table making himself very pleasant and friendly, the surprise of Nelly and Dick came to a height. As for Mrs. Eastwood, she had a mother's natural certainty that her son's manners were always agreeable, except when something had disturbed him. Nothing, it was evident, had disturbed him this morning, and he could show himself in his true colours. He was very communicative and conciliatory, and told them how he had been persuaded to accompany some people whom he met to the play, and that the piece was very stupid, like so many pieces now-a-days.

"That's all very well for you who were there," said Dick; "I should like to find out for myself. All pieces are stupid to a fellow that can see them whenever he likes."

"You might have had my share and welcome, old fellow," said Frederick, with undiminished amiability. "I didn't pay much attention, to tell the truth. There was the loveliest girl in the box—a Miss Batty. Her father is a—country doctor, I think; but such a beautiful creature!"

I don't know what tempted him to make this confidence; probably the desire to be talking of her. And then he described her, which raised a discussion round the table.

"I am sick of golden hair," said Dick, who was moved by a spirit of contradiction. "There are so many of 'em in novels, great, sleek, indolent, cat-like——"

"And rather improper," said Mrs. Eastwood; "doing things that one cannot approve of girls doing. In my day what you call golden hair was known as red. Raven locks were the right thing for a heroine, very smooth and glossy——"

"Well plastered down with pomade, and not safe to touch," said Nelly, shaking her own brown locks. "But I agree with you, Fre-

derick, there is no hair so lovely as golden hair. Is your beauty going to stay long in town? Do we know any one who knows her? Has she come for the season?"

"They are staying at an hotel," said Frederick, very seriously. "I met the father in Paris, quite by chance, when I was getting better. That is how I came to know them. They are not quite in your set, I suppose. But she is simply the most radiant, dazzling creature——"

"All red and white and green and blue," said the irrepressible Dick, "with her hair growing down to her eyes—oh, I know! seven feet high, and weighing twelve stone."

"Yes, that is odd too," said Mrs. Eastwood; "people like that kind of huge woman. In my days, now, a light, elastic figure——"

"They all died of consumption," said Nelly. She was herself exactly the kind of being whom her mother described; but she took up the cause of the other with natural perverseness. A curious sense of possible help gleamed across Frederick's mind as he listened. He would not allow himself to realize under what possible circumstances Nelly's championship might be useful to him; but his mind jumped at the thought, with a sudden perception of possibilities which he by no means wished to follow out at once to their full length and breadth. When he went to the office he congratulated himself secretly on his skill in having thus introduced the subject so as to awaken no suspicion—and he went into the conservatory, and cut a lovely little white camellia bud, which Nelly had been saving up for quite another button-hole. It was just after the exciting moment of Nelly's betrothal, and the house was full of a certain suggestion of love-making, which, perhaps, helped to stimulate Frederick's thoughts; but his blaze of sudden passion was very different from the sentiments of the others. He went to the office first, feeling it too early to be admitted to Amanda's beautiful presence. Happily, there was not very much to do at the Sealing Wax Office. He spent an hour or two there, in a feverish flutter, disturbing the others (who, fortunately, were not very hard at work), and throwing all his own occupations into confusion. At twelve he went out, and made his way to the hotel. He found Batty there, but not his daughter.

"'Manda? Oh, she's all right," said the father; "but the laziest girl in Christendom. Pretty women are all lazy. *I* haven't seen her yet, and don't expect to for an hour or more. Have a glass of something, Eastwood, to fill up the time?"

Frederick winced at this free-and-easy address, and hastened to explain that he was on his way to keep a pressing engagement, and would return in the afternoon, to pay his respects to Miss Batty. *At three o'clock* he went back, and found her indeed; but found *also Lord Hunterston* and another visitor, with whom Miss

Amanda kept up a very lively conversation. Batty himself filled up the centre of the scene, and made a variety with talk of horses and feats in the hunting field. Frederick was left in the background, to his intense misery. He heard one of the other visitors asked in easy terms to dinner that evening, with again the thrilling prospect of the play after it. He himself, it would seem, had had his day. The only crumb of comfort he procured from the visit was the name of the theatre they were going to. He rushed to Covent Garden after this, poor wretch, and bought the costliest bouquet he could find and sent it to her. Then he dined, miserable and solitary, at his club, speaking no word to any man, and went afterwards to the blessed theatre in which she was to exhibit her beauty to the world. He saw her from the first moment of her arrival, and watched with horrible sensations from his stall the comfortable arrangement of Lord Hunterston in his corner beside her, and the large figure of the father behind dropping into a gentle doze. He sat and gazed at them in tortures of adoration and jealousy, wondering if she was saying the same things to his successor as she had said to him; wondering if Hunterston, too, was being invited to Sterborne, and ridiculed about the necessity of getting "leave"—for, Frederick reflected with some satisfaction, "leave" was necessary also to that distinguished guardsman. As soon as it was practicable he made his way up to the box; but gained little by it, since Mr. Batty insisted upon waking up, and entertaining him, which he did chiefly by chuckling references to their previous meeting in Paris, and the amusements of that gay place. Frederick went home half wild to the calm house where his mother and sister were sleeping quietly; and where poor little Innocent alone heard his step coming up-stairs, and longed to get up and say good-night to him, though he had "scolded" her. Had she known it, Innocent was deeply avenged. Amanda Batty had not spared the rash adorer. She had "made fun" of him in a hundred refined and elegant ways, joking about his gravity and serious looks, about his fondness for the theatre, and his kindness in coming to speak to herself. "When I am sure you might have gone behind the scenes if you liked," she said, with a laugh that showed all her pearly teeth. "You, who know so much about the theatres: how I should like to go behind the scenes!"

Frederick, who had made so many sacrifices to appearances, and who was distinguished in society for the stateliness of his demeanour, would have been infinitely insulted had any one else said this—all the more insulted for his own consciousness of those moments of aberration in which he had been behind a great many scenes—though never, so far as he was aware, where he could be found out. But a man in love is compelled, when the lady of his affections is like Miss Amanda, to put up with insults, and does so in scores of cases with a meekness which is nowhere apparent in his domestic

character. Frederick felt himself punctured by shafts of ridicule not too finely pointed. He was laughed at, he was rallied, jokes were made upon him. He was even treated with absolute rudeness, Amanda turning her beautiful shoulders upon him, and addressing Lord Hunterston, in the very midst of something Frederick was saying to her. A thrill of momentary fury went through him, but next moment he was abject in his endeavours to get a glance from her—a word of reply.

"Don't you mind her—it's 'Manda's way," said Batty, laughing as he saw the gloom on Frederick's face. "The more insulting she is one evening, the nicer she'll be the next. Don't you pay any attention: it's his turn to-night, and yours to-morrow. Don't take it too serious, Eastwood; if you'll be guided by me——"

"I fear I don't quite understand you, Mr. Batty," said poor Frederick, writhing in impotent pride at the liberties taken with him. Upon which Batty laughed again, more insolently good-humoured than ever.

"As you like—as you like," he said; "you are more likely to want me, I can tell you, than I am to want you."

Frederick answered nothing: his mind was torn in pieces. Could he have had strength to go away, to break those fatal chains which in a day—in a moment—had been thrown over him, he would have done it. A sudden impulse to fly came over him; but a hundred past yieldings to temptation had sapped the strength of his nature, and taken away from him all power to make such a strenuous resistance to his own wishes. The self-willed, proud young man put down his head and licked the dust before the coarse beauty who had stolen away his wits, and the coarse man whose familiarity was so odious to him. He turned from the father, and addressed himself with eager adoration to the daughter; and, perhaps because Amanda was a thorough coquette, and enjoyed her own cleverness in pitting one admirer against another—perhaps because the misery and earnestness in the eyes of her new slave softened her, she was friendly to him for the rest of the evening, and wrapped his foolish soul in happiness. Before they parted he was made happy by another invitation. They were but to be two nights more in town, and one of these evenings Frederick was to spend with them.

"Be sure and find out for me the very nicest thing that is to be played in London," she said, turning round to him as she left the theatre, though the rival had her hand on his arm. The sweetness of this preference, the sign she made to him as the carriage drove away, contented, and more than contented, Frederick. He went home happy; he got through—he did not know how—the intervening time. Next afternoon he went to call on her, at one moment *gaining a few words*, which made him blessed, at another turning *away with his pride* lacerated and his heart bleeding. The succession

of ups and downs was enough to have given variety to months of ordinary love-making. Frederick was tossed from delight to despair, and back again. He was jibed at, flattered, made use of, tormented, and consoled. Had he been a man of finer mind, he might possibly have been disgusted; but it is astonishing what even men of the finest minds will submit to under the force of such an imperious passion. They console themselves by the conclusion that all women are the same, and that theirs is the common fate. If Frederick had any time to think in the hurry of emotion and excitement which swept him as into the vortex of a whirlpool, he excused Miss 'Manda's cruelties and caprices by this explanation. All women who possessed, as she did, those glorious gifts of beauty—all the Cleopatras of existence—were like her; they had to be worshipped blindly, not considered as reasonable creatures. Reason! what had reason to do with those shoulders, those cheeks, those eyes?

The evening came at last—the evening of rapture and misery which he was to spend by her side, but which was to be the last. He counted how many hours it could be lengthened out to, and gave himself up to the enjoyment, not daring to forecast to himself what he might say or do before that cycle of happiness was ended. He dressed himself with so much care that Mrs. Eastwood, who had never forgotten that enthusiastic description of Miss Batty, felt an uneasiness for which she could give no very distinct reason. This time the roses in the conservatory were not enough for Frederick. He had brought one from Covent Garden, carefully wrapped up in cotton wool; and he spoiled half-a-dozen ties before he could tie one to his satisfaction. His mother peeped at him from the door of her room as he went down-stairs. In consequence of their play-going propensities, the Battys had to dine early. It was but half-past six when Frederick left The Elms in his hansom, which he had taken the trouble to order beforehand. Mrs. Eastwood opened her window, with a faint hope that perhaps the wind might convey his instructions to the driver to her anxious ear. She withdrew blushing, poor soul, when this attempt proved unsuccessful. It was almost dishonourable—like listening at a door. When one does not succeed in a little wile of this description, one realizes how ignoble was the attempt.

"Of course, if I had asked him where he was going, he would have told me," she said to herself.

But the truth was that Frederick had so often returned disagreeable answers to such questions, and had made so many remarks upon the curiosity of women, &c., that the household had ceased to inquire into his movements. He was the only one of the family whose comings and goings were not open as daylight to whomsoever cared to see.

His heart beat higher and higher as he threaded the streets and

approached the second-rate London inn which was to him the centre of the world. When he was shown into the room, however, in which dinner was prepared as usual, he went in upon a scene for which he was totally unprepared. Seated by the fire, which had suddenly become unnecessary by a change in the weather, and which made the little room very stuffy and hot, was Amanda, wrapped in a great shawl. Her usual sublime evening toilette had been exchanged for a white dressing-gown, all frills and bows of ribbon. High up on her cheeks, just under her eyes, were two blazing spots of pink. Her face, except for these, was pale and drawn. The sound of her voice, fretful and impatient, was the first thing Frederick heard. By her sat a middle-aged woman in an elaborate cap with flowers. There was a medicine bottle on the mantelpiece. Frederick rushed forward, in wonder and dismay.

"Miss Batty—Good God, you are ill——!"

"You may see that, I think, without asking," said Amanda; "when one is well one does not show like this, I hope. The last night, too—the last time for ages I shall have the least chance of enjoying myself, or having a little fun. Oh, it is too shocking! When one is at home, with nothing going on, one does not mind; it is always something to occupy one. Oh, go away please. Dine somewhere with papa. He is waiting for you outside; never mind me. Oh, aunty, can't you be still—rustling and rustling for ever and ever, and setting all my nerves on edge."

A sudden blackness came over Frederick's soul. "Dine somewhere with papa." Good heavens! was that the entertainment offered to him after all his hopes? He stood transfixed as it were, immovable in a blank and horrible pause of disappointment. The close room and the sudden revulsion of feeling made him sick and faint. His perfect and faultless costume, the delicate rosebud in his coat, his tie which it had taken him so much trouble to bring to perfection, his boots upon which he had been so careful not to have a speck—all struck Amanda with relenting as she looked at him, and finally roused her a little out of her absorption in her own troubles. He looked such a gentleman! Miss Batty belonged to that class which is given to describe its heroes as "looking like gentlemen," with often an uneasy sense that the looks are the only things gentlemanlike about them. Frederick impressed her profoundly and suddenly by this means. She relented as she looked at him.

"Dinner was laid here," she said, "as you see—but I don't think I could stand it,—and then when one is not dressed or anything—it would not be nice for you——"

"It is perfectly nice for me," said Frederick, coming to life again—"a thousand times more nice than anything else. Your dress is always perfect, whatever it may be. Let me stay! What do I care *for dining or anything* else? Let me be with you. Let me read to *you. Don't send* me into outer darkness——"

"Oh, how you do talk, Mr. Eastwood," said Amanda, though with a smile. "No, of course you must dine. We must all dine. No, now go away. I could not have it. Let some one call papa, and you can go with him——" she paused for a moment, enjoying the blank misery that once more fell upon Frederick's face; then added suddenly,—"On second thoughts, after all, it might amuse me. Aunty, ring the bell. If you are sure you don't mind my dressing gown—and the room being so warm—and aunty being here,—and the medicine bottle, and the big fire,—well, perhaps," she said, pausing to laugh in a breathless way,—"you may stay."

If the Queen had created him Earl of Eastwood with corresponding revenues, it would have been nothing to the bliss of this moment. He drew a footstool to her feet and sat down on it, half kneeling, and made his inquiries.—What was it? How was it? was she suffering? did she feel ill? had she a doctor, the best doctor that London could produce, Jenner, Gull, somebody that could be trusted? Amanda informed him that it was heart disease from which she was suffering, an intimation which she made not without complacency, but which Frederick felt to pierce him like a horrible, sudden arrow—and that "Aunty" here present, whom she introduced with a careless wave of her hand, knew exactly what to do.

"It is dreadful, isn't it, to think I might die any moment?" she said with a smile.

"Good God!" Frederick said, with unaffected horror, "it cannot be true!" and he sat, stricken dumb, gazing at her, the tears forcing themselves to his eyes. Mr. Batty entered at this moment, and the man, who was human and a father, was touched by this evidence of emotion. He wrung Frederick's hand and whispered him aside.

"It ain't as bad as it seems," he said. "We daren't cross her. If she wanted the moon I'd have to tell her we'd get it somehow. We've known for years that she wasn't to be crossed; but barring that, I hope all's pretty safe. It's bad for her temper, poor girl, but I'm not afraid of her life."

Frederick spent such an evening as he had never spent in his life. He sat at Amanda's feet and read to her, and talked to her, and listened to her chatter, which was soft and subdued, for she was languid after her spasms. Mr. Batty sat by most part of the evening admiring, and so did the person called Aunty, who kept in constant attendance. Frederick could not throw himself at Miss 'Manda's feet according to conventional form; he could not declare his love and entreat her to marry him, as he was burning to do, for he was not permitted a minute alone with her. But short of that, he said everything that a man in love could do. He told his adoration by a hundred signs and inferences. And he went home in such a whirl of sentiment and emotion as I cannot attempt to describe. His love was frantic, yet so tinged and imbued with a sense of the

virtuous and domestic character of this evening of complete happiness, that he felt as good as he was blessed. She was going away; that was the only drawback to his rapture; and even that impressed a certain intense and ecstatic character upon it, as of a flower snatched from the edge of a precipice of despair.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FAMILY DINNER.

WHILE this wild love-fever of Frederick's had run its course, Nelly's little drama had also enacted itself, and the interview between Mrs. Eastwood and Mr. Molyneux, Q.C., had taken place, so that the moment had been an exciting one in the family story. The young people were absorbed in their different adventures, and it was only the mother who felt, even though she did not know, all that was going on, on either hand. She did not know what it was which had moved Frederick so much out of his usual composure, which had made him "engaged" and inaccessible to all family invitations or arrangements during one entire week. He had never mentioned Miss Batty or her beauty again, but he had been engaged every evening, going out early and staying late, and making no allusion to where he had been. Indeed during that period he had scarcely seen any of the family, except his mother herself, who had waited to pour out his coffee for him at breakfast, and who saw by his hurried manner and self-absorbed looks that something more than ordinary must be going on. But he had offered no confidences, and Mrs. Eastwood had not gone so far as to ask for any, partly from pride, and partly from a compassionate unwillingness to disturb him any more than he was already disturbed. The time when she could inquire into his troubles and set them right was over. But she was uneasy about him, not knowing what to think, anxious and unhappy; and she was still more distinctly disturbed about the Molyneux business, and the engagements which she might be forced into, against her will and her judgment, on Nelly's account. The shadow which thus had come upon her overshadowed the whole house, as I have already said. It irritated Ernest Molyneux, and it made Nelly unhappy. Nelly, poor child, had never known what it was to have any cross influences in her life before. She had never been pulled two ways, never divided in her affections or her allegiance. Few people appreciate the difference this makes in a *girl's* life. She is taken suddenly in the midst of an existence *which is all tender,* filial duty, or that sweet counterfeit of filial duty

which animates the child's mind who has a large part in deciding the will of the parent who guides her, and is unconsciously the inspiration of the very laws she obeys. This had been Nelly's case. She and her mother had been as one soul—the one ruling, the other obeying, but neither able to discriminate from which came the original impulse; and now she felt herself suddenly placed in a position, if not of antagonism to her mother, yet at least of tenderest sympathy and union with one who declared himself so far her mother's antagonist. This curious turn and twist of circumstances made the girl giddy,—it gave an uncertainty to all things, it confused her old ideas, the ideas which she had held as unchangeable till the day before yesterday, when they were suddenly undermined, and all her old gods made to totter in their shrines.

"Your mother does not like me," Molyneux said to her one day, when Mrs. Eastwood, disturbed and worried by a communication from his father, had been cold and distant to him. "It is always the way. She was nice enough as long as I was only a young fellow dangling about the house; but as soon as everything is settled, and you are ready to have me, Nelly, she turns off at a tangent. Clearly, your mother does not like me——"

"How can you say so?" cried Nelly. "Oh, Ernest, as if it were possible——"

"Quite possible,—indeed, quite common," he said, shaking his head. "You don't know the world, darling, and I don't wish you to; but when people have to make sacrifices to establish their children, they don't like it. Nobody likes to have a sacrifice to make. I suppose I thought your mother different, because she was your mother; but human nature is the same everywhere,—though you, Nelly, Heaven be praised, have no knowledge of the world——"

"Is it mamma you mean by the world?" said Nelly, disengaging herself almost unconsciously from her lover's arm.

"Don't be vexed dear. Mothers are just like other people. When our interests come to be in opposition to those of our nearest and dearest——"

"How can mamma's interests be in opposition to ours?" said Nelly, with open eyes.

"Well, I suppose our parents have got to provide for us," said Molyneux. "They have got to part with so much, on one side and the other, to set us up—and they don't like it—naturally. When it comes to be our turn we shall not like it either. There is always a struggle going on, though your dear, innocent eyes don't see it; we trying to get as much as we can, they to give us as little as they can;—that is what makes your mother look so glum at me."

"We trying to get as much as we can,—they to give us as little as they can?" repeated Nelly, with a dreamy wonder in her tone. She dwelt on the words as if she were counting them, like beads.

She had withdrawn, quite involuntarily and unawares, from his side.

"I don't want to vex you about it," he said, drawing closer to her. "It can't be helped, and after it is settled, things will come right again. You don't know anything about business, and I don't want you to know about it——"

"I know all about mamma's business," said Nelly. She withdrew again with a little impatience from his close approach. She fell amusing and thinking, and made some excuse, soon after, to get away from him. She was startled beyond measure in the straightforwardness of a soul unacquainted with business. Very strange to her was this unexpected distinction and separation. Was it really possible that her mother's interests were opposite to her own, for the first time in her life? "We trying to get as much as we can,—they to give us as little as they can," she said to herself, in the solitude of her room, putting the fingers of one hand against those of the other, as if to count the words. Nelly was bewildered,—her head was dizzy through this strange whirlabout of heaven and earth,—the firm ground seemed failing beneath her feet.

It was about this time that another person appeared on the family scene, a man about whom none of the Eastwoods felt any particular interest, or rather, against whom they had all a decided prejudice. This was John Vane, a distant cousin of Innocent's father, a squire in the north country, with considerable, but poor estates, who had lived a wandering life for some years, and who was considered by all who knew him "eccentric," to say the least. His true name was Reginald or Roland, or something of a sentimental and ornamental description represented by the letter R; but Society, which has a way of identifying character by this simple means, called him John. He was a man of three or four and thirty, with a brown complexion tanned by much exposure to wind and weather, and a golden brown beard, which was the chief feature about him to a stranger. His hair had worn off his temples, and he had a threatening of baldness, as if the forest on his chin had drawn all his locks downwards. His forehead was clear and open and white, in contrast with the tanned and much-lined surface of the more exposed parts of his face. He was by no means the nearest or even a near relation of Innocent, but he had lost no time in seeking her out. He arrived on the very day when this first touch of doubt and pain came into Nelly's belief in her lover; and it was by no means a happy household in which the new comer appeared one bright spring morning shortly after the events we have been telling. His mission was to ask what had become of his cousin's child, to ascertain in the most delicate way possible what was her position in her aunt's house, and to offer her, should that prove necessary, a refuge in his own. He made this offer with so much grace and natural kindness that Mrs. Eastwood's prejudices against him fled like the morning dew. She

was prejudiced against everything (except poor Innocent) that bore the name of Vane, and against this John Vane in particular, whose father had been a man of very unsettled opinions, and who was understood to have been badly brought up. Innocent, too, poor child, had been very badly brought up, and Mrs. Eastwood shuddered at the idea of what might follow if the one uninstructed nature was put into the hands of the other. But Mr. John Vane had that sure passport to a woman's favour—a frank and open countenance, and a pair of smiling eyes which met your gaze frankly. He made so pleasant an impression that Mrs. Eastwood ended by inviting him to a very solemn dinner party which was to take place at her house that evening—a dinner at which "the Molyneuxes" were to be present, though the negotiations between Ernest's side and Nelly's side were yet far from being completed. Major Railton, who had been one of the invited guests, had felt his courage fail him at the last moment, and had sent an excuse on account of his health. "Mr. Vane is a kind of a connexion," Mrs. Eastwood said, doubtfully, when she explained the change to her son. Frederick, who was full of other thoughts, made no objection, and Mr. Vane, who was not less pleased with his new acquaintances than they were with him, accepted frankly. This dinner-party was a very great event in the family; and though dinner-parties are not generally exciting occurrences, I may perhaps be pardoned, for the sake of the issues, if I dwell upon it a little. The chief guests were the Molyneuxes—Mr. and Mrs. and Miss, the latter of whom we may drop out of the present history, having already enough people on our hands. They were both of opinion that Mrs. Eastwood had "kept her eye upon" Ernest for years, and that Nelly had made "a dead set" at him; and they were accordingly dignified and a little condescending in their cordiality. Mr. and Mrs. Brotherton also formed part of the company, along with two other of Mrs. Eastwood's advisers—Mr. Parchemin and Mrs. Everard; and the party was made up to the number of sixteen (which was all that could be comfortably accommodated at the Elms dinner table) by the presence of Sir Alexis Longueville and his sister. In opposition to the selection of this guest, Nelly had put forth the moral objections to him which her lover had on a certain evening pressed so warmly upon her, but had found, to her great amazement, that Ernest laughed at the whole matter, and declared Longueville one of the best fellows going; while Mrs. Eastwood silenced her with some indignation, declaring that she had known him for twenty years, and would not have any old scandals raked up. Poor Nelly, who knew nothing about the old scandals, but who felt the whole responsibility thrown upon her, withdrew, hot with angry blushes, from the discussion, feeling as if she had shown a shameful knowledge of the evil reports of the past, which the poor child was, in fact, as ignorant of as a baby. "We must forgive and forget," even

Ernest said to her. "Don't be such a terrible moralist, Nelly." This, too, wounded poor Nelly, in the ignorance and innocence of her youth.

The dinner went off as such dinners do everywhere. There was a great display of all the Eastwood plate, and the meal itself lasted two hours and a half, and included everything that was out of season, and all that was most costly in the way of eating and drinking. Mrs. Eastwood, at the head of her own table, with Sir Alexis on one side of her and Mr. Molyneux on the other, tried her very best to feel no sort of opposition to the latter, and to look as if nothing but family love and union was symbolized by their meeting. Frederick, at the other end, with his head full of Amanda Batty, endeavoured to give his best attention to the gorgeous Mrs. Barclay and the dignified Mrs. Molyneux. He had his Charles the First look upon him, and he was not judged severely by these ladies, who thought him superior to the rest of the family, and very probably worried by his mother, whom Mrs. Molyneux considered a scheming and worldly person. The other members of the party had, no doubt, their own cares; but their cares do not concern us greatly, except in so far as Nelly was concerned, whose poor little heart was wounded and her mind confused, and who, in her position of *fiancée*, felt this sort of formal reception of her by her lover's parents to suggest all kinds of strange doubts and miseries, and to throw uncertainty instead of security upon the bond which had been tied so tightly, yet so happily, in the cold, half-frozen garden but a little while before. No doubt that she loved Ernest Molyneux, or that his love made her perfectly happy, had crossed her mind then. She had been as full of gentle bliss as a girl could be, when she had stolen in with him into the drawing-room in the firelight, frightened lest any one should see how he held her hand, and yet unable to conceive how anything or any one in the world could be ignorant of the new great flood of light and joy which had flooded earth and heaven. In that beatific moment, however, no idea of settlements or negotiations, or the suggestion that Ernest might have done better, or that it was his business and hers to try to get as much as they could, had entered into her mind. There are well-seasoned and justly-regulated minds, even of twenty, which understand all these accessories as well as the oldest of us, and have no nonsense about them, and are robust enough to enter into the whole question "as a matter of business." But Nelly was not one of these. She had a great deal of nonsense about her. She was shocked, chilled, brought to a stand suddenly, in the first outset of her independent career. Her love seemed to have ceased to be real, now that it was being talked about and struggled over, and Ernest, Ernest himself——. She would not say, even in the depths of her own heart, any more *than this;* but her poor little heart gave an inarticulate cry when he *opened up his* philosophy to her with so much confidence, and con-

gratulated himself that she knew nothing of business. Nelly did not know whether, perhaps, among the strange confusions of this world, he might not be right. She saw no way out of the maze. She did not know how she herself, if left to herself, could have bettered it; but her instinctive sense of what was noble and ignoble, lovely and unlovely, was deeply wounded. She was put out of harmony with herself and every one. If life was so—if such gulfs were ready to open under your feet at your very first step in it, was it worth living? Such was the painful question, not yet put into words, that breathed through poor Nelly's heart.

Mr. John Vane was on one side of her, and Ernest on the other; but Mrs. Everard, who was a great conversationalist, had taken possession of young Molyneux, and was putting him through a catechism. Nelly did not feel herself capable of talk, but the kind looks of her next neighbour were comforting, and he was touched by her downcast, yet bright, face.

"Miss Eastwood," he said, "may I guess at something? I am a stranger, but I am a connexion. You know your mother admitted my claims. This is a solemn family assembly to celebrate something that is to make your happiness. Have I guessed rightly; and will you forgive me, and let me make my congratulations too?"

Nelly looked up, blushing and bright and sorry, and very much tempted to cry. "Oh, Mr. Vane, I can't bear it," she said.

"What, not the happiness? I could bear a great deal of it if it ever came my way."

"Has it never come your way?" said Nelly, looking at him wistfully. "But I did not mean—the happiness. I have always been very happy. It is the family assembly, and the talk, and the congratulations. If you don't know, you can't think how they hurt, how they——"

"Take the bloom off?"

"I suppose that is it," said Nelly, with a soft little sigh.

Vane, who had a great deal more experience than she gave him credit for, looked past her at her lover, and concluded, on perfectly insufficient grounds, that Molyneux was not worthy of Nelly. The ladies of Ernest's family were not only convinced of the fact that Nelly was quite unworthy of *him*, but that Frederick also was really misplaced in such a family. Why such ideas should be so readily entertained by the different halves of humanity, I cannot tell. It was something in Nelly's tone and something in the cut of Ernest's nose which decided Mr. Vane.

"And would it be impertinent of a stranger, who is a connexion, to ask if it is all settled," he said, "and when it is to be?"

"Nothing is settled," said Nelly, with a deeper blush than ever; and after a pause she turned to him with a despairing simplicity, which he did not quite understand. "Mr. Vane," she said, "I should like to ask you something. You say it has never come your

way. Yet you look as if one might ask you things. Do you think that people, relations, those who have been each other's dearest friends—or more than friends—I mean," said Nelly, "one's father or mother even—do you think they change to you, when your interests are in opposition to theirs?"

"One's father or mother?" said Vane, trying to follow her thought; "but that must be so rare a case, Miss Eastwood."

"You think so too?" said Nelly brightly, recovering herself in a moment. "That is my opinion; but they tell me I know nothing of the world. How can one's interests be in opposition to those of one's own people? Since ever I have known anything, I have been taught the contrary. I am so glad you think as I do."

"But stop a little," said Vane, "perhaps we are going too far. Suppose we were to take an instance. Regan and Goneril felt their interests to be in opposition to their father's, and it did make a great change in them. If we were to ask more than we ought from our nearest relation, it would wound his sense of justice and his trust in us; even love might be impaired. I have known men who threw themselves upon their friends to save them from ruin, real or supposed, and to whom there was no change of feeling. And I have known others who made demands upon the same friends for no greater sacrifice, to whom it was given with a sore heart and a deep sense of injury. All the difference depends upon the circumstances."

Nelly grew wistful again; she was not satisfied. "Tell me this, then," she said in a low voice, which he had to stoop to hear. "Is it natural that we should be always trying how much we can get, and they how little they can give?"

"Any one who told you so," said Vane indignantly, "must have the lowest and meanest conception"—then he caught Nelly's eye with a mingled look of fright and entreaty in it, which at the moment he could make nothing of, but which touched some instinct in his mind more capable of action than reason, and compelled him to change his tone. "I mean," he said, with a forced laugh, "that this is the conventional way in which we speak in society, which sounds terrible but means nothing. It is the fashionable cynical view, which we all pretend to take to hide the real feeling, which it is not English to show. How didactic you have made me, Miss Eastwood, and what a serious strain we have drifted into! I am afraid you will never sit next to me again."

"Indeed, I will, and like it," said honest Nelly, smiling at him with her heart in her eyes. It seemed to Nelly that here was a sort of big brother, kinder than Frederick, wiser than Dick, who had suddenly come to her aid to disentangle for her that ravelled skein which had troubled her mind so much. She turned round to *Ernest forthwith,* and whispered something to him with a sweet *compunction, to* make up for the injustice she had done him in her

heart. Mr. Vane, I am sorry to say, was not moved with like sentiments. He gave a short, audible breath of impatience through his nostrils, which he ought not to have done, and glanced at young Molyneux over Nelly's head, and said to himself, "Confound the fellow!" I have observed that, towards a young man in Ernest's position, this is a common sentiment—with men.

Innocent was on her cousin's other side. Mrs. Eastwood had hesitated much about this, feeling that at sixteen, and with no education, the girl ought not perhaps to be allowed to assist at a dinner party. But Mr. Vane's presence and the family character of the whole ceremony decided her. It was a very poor pleasure to Innocent. She was dressed in a black tulle dress, like nothing she had ever worn before, and which seemed to transmogrify her and turn her into some one else. Nelly had made a valiant effort to put up her hair, and give her something of the aspect of a young lady of the period, but this even Mrs. Eastwood had resisted, saying wisely, that if Innocent appeared with her hair hanging on her shoulders, as she always wore it, it would be presumed at once that she was "still in the schoolroom" (poor Innocent, who had never been in the schoolroom in her life!), a girl not yet "out." She answered only "Yes" or "No" to the questions Vane put to her, and would have stolen away from the drawing-room afterwards altogether if she had not been detained by something like force. The great Mrs. Molyneux took condescending notice of her, and plied her with a great many questions, all actuated by an idea of which no one in the family had the smallest conception. "I don't doubt they neglect her shamefully," she said to her daughter, after she had ascertained that Innocent neither played, nor sang, nor drew; that she had never been to school, nor had a governess, nor masters, and that, in short, she knew nothing.

I am quite unable to tell why this discovery should have given pleasure to Ernest's mother, but it did so, and was remembered and made use of afterwards in most unthought-of ways. But Innocent interested more people than Mrs. Molyneux. When Sir Alexis came into the drawing-room after dinner, he requested to be presented to the young stranger. "I think I knew her father," he said, and he went and sat by her, and did his best to call forth some response. "Since he cannot have the one, he is going to try for the other," said Mrs. Barclay in Mrs. Eastwood's ear. But whatever his intentions or desires might be, he did not make much of Innocent, who was frozen back into her old stupefied dulness by the many strange faces and fresh appeals made to her. "You remember your father?" said Sir Alexis, meaning to move her. "Oh, yes," said Innocent, but took little further interest in hearing about him. Perhaps, had it been Niccolo, he might have moved her more.

"Has she *all her faculties?*" he asked, hesitating, of Nelly.

"Oh, yes, I think so. She has never been taught anything She has not got over her strangeness yet, and she does not care for any of us," said Nelly, "except perhaps——"

Here she paused, not venturing to add the name that came to her lips. Young Molyneux laughed, and took up the words.

"Except, perhaps—yourself, do you mean? You made a wonderful picture once of the cousin whom you expected; how she was to be the most beautiful, clever, learned, accomplished of women, to throw everybody else into the shade; and how, in self-defence, you would have to be cruel to her, to banish her to the schoolroom——"

"That has come true," said Nelly, smiling, "but it is the only thing. She is not Aurora Leigh."

"She has a beautiful face," said Sir Alexis. They all looked at the girl when he said so, for her beauty was not of a kind which struck every beholder at the first glance. She was sitting quite by herself, in the corner which she preferred, with her hands crossed upon her lap, and her head half turned, following Frederick with an undivided gaze. She was not conscious of any observation. She had eyes but for him alone.

CHAPTER XXII.

ABOUT ANOTHER MARRIAGE.

FREDERICK was in so strangely disturbed a state of mind that this evening's entertainment—as well as all the other incidents of these hurrying days, which seemed years as they passed, yet appeared to have raced by him helter-skelter as soon as they were gone—was to him as a dream. He did not seem to know what he was about. Whatever he did was done mechanically. He declined all engagements, never went to his club, went home of nights, and shut himself up in the library or his own room, smoking a greater number of cigars than he had ever done in his life before, and thinking of *her*. Tobacco may be said to be the food of love to the modern man, as it is the food of musing minds, and intellectual work or idleness. Frederick lighted one after another mechanically, and brooded over the image of Amanda. He thought of her in every aspect under which he had seen her. He recalled to his mind, in detail, the times when they had met, and everything that had been said and done. And there came upon him a hunger for her presence which he could not overcome, and scarcely restrain. *She was not* an interesting or amusing companion in any intellectual *way*. *Her* talk was the merest chit-chat. The amusements

and occupations she preferred were not of an elevated character; she ignored or was bored by everything serious; she was uneducated, sometimes almost vulgar. But all this made no difference, though he was sensible of it. He made, indeed, occasional efforts to throw off the spell that bound him; to try, if not to forget her, at least to consider all the obstacles that stood between them. Their condition of life was entirely different, and to this Frederick was deeply sensitive. He had trembled to have Batty find him out at his club, or visit him at his office. He had accepted the man's invitation in haste to get rid of him, that no one might see the kind of person who claimed his acquaintance; and, good heavens! if that very man became his father-in-law! Then Frederick acknowledged to himself that Amanda would be "pulled to pieces by the women." Men might admire her only too much; but, notwithstanding Frederick's contempt for women, he felt the deepest angry humiliation at the thought that only men probably would approve of his wife—if she should become his wife. Then he had no means to gratify this sudden passion. He had been very lucky at the office, making his way by a series of deaths and misfortunes to a position which he could scarcely have hoped to hold for five or six years longer. Three or four hundred a year, however, though much for a public office, is not much to set up house upon, according to Frederick Eastwood's ideas. He had, like Nelly, five thousand pounds, but what was that? he said to himself, having the exalted notions peculiar to the young men of the period. For a young man, living at home in a handsome house, which cost him nothing, and where he could entertain his friends when need was, this was very comfortable; but if he married, and had to keep up an establishment of his own, things would appear in a very different light. The marriage he ought to have made was with some one at least as rich as himself; he ought to have done as his father had done, whose wife had more than doubled his income. All this Frederick was deeply, sadly aware of. He knew that he ought to do exactly the reverse of what he wanted to do; he knew that at the very least he ought to pause and consider carefully all the penalties, all the misery involved. But in the very midst of his wisest thoughts a sudden recollection would sweep away every scrap of good sense he possessed, as well as all that paramount regard for self which had carried him over so many hidden rocks and dangers of which he alone knew. Perhaps it would be wrong to say that love had triumphed over self in this struggle. It was a victory more subtle still—it was the triumph of the self of passion over the self of prudence and worldly well-being. It was gratification as against profit—delight against honour. I may, perhaps, judge him harshly, for this class of sentiment is one, I am aware, in which women are apt to show a want of understanding; but the reader will decide in how far the

credit of a generous passion, scorning consequences, may be attributed to Frederick Eastwood. I do not call this kind of frenzy love; but there are many that do. Of the true being called Amanda Batty he knew next to nothing, and what he did know would, had he been in his sober senses, have revolted his good taste, and disgusted all his finer perceptions. Even now he had a vague prevision that he would be bitterly ashamed of her, did she belong to him; and a certainty that he would be more than ashamed of her belongings, whom already he loathed; but the outside of her filled him with a hungry worship, which overcame his reason and all the sane portion of his mind. After he had forced himself to think over all the disadvantages, to represent to himself the descent into another sphere, the want of means, the horrible neighbourhood into which he would be thrown, there would suddenly gleam upon his mind that turn of her soft round shoulder when she flung away from him in disdain; the dimples in it, the velvet texture, the snowy whiteness just touched with tints of rose—and all his wiser self was at once trampled underfoot. Yet he stood out bravely, fighting with himself after the same fashion but more strenuously than he had done on other occasions, when not a lawful love, but a wild, lawless desire for pleasure, possessed him. Never before had he made so long or so hard a stand. In the other cases not much had been in question—a bout of dissipation might carry with it a good many headaches, an empty purse, and, if found out, a slur upon that spotless character which it was Frederick's pride to maintain; but it could do no more; whereas this would compromise his life. Would it compromise his life? Might it not turn out for the best, as the other event did which had seemed to envelope him in ruin? Could not he cut the Batty connexion altogether—make a condition that she was to be entirely handed over to him, and never inquired about more? And must not his own innate refinement, his constant companionship, reform the beautiful creature herself into all that could be desired? This flattering unction sometimes Frederick succeeded in laying to his soul; but to do him justice he much more generally perceived and acknowledged to their full extent the obstacles in his way, and made his fight honestly, knowing what it was he was fighting against.

Things, however, came to a crisis before very long. He did not himself know how long the struggle lasted; it absorbed him at last out of almost all consciousness of what was going on round him. He kept his usual place, got through, somehow, his usual work, ate and drank, and answered when he was spoken to, and knew nothing about it. During this period perhaps Innocent was the greatest comfort he had. The spring had come with a bound in the beginning of April, after a long stretch of cold weather, and when after dinner he strayed out of doors to wander under the elms, and carry on his eternal self-conflict, it was rather soothing to him than

otherwise when his cousin came stealing to his side in the soft twilight. Poor child! how fond she was of him! it was pleasant to have her there. She put her hand softly within his arm, and held his sleeve, and turned with him when he turned, as long as he liked, or at least until his mother's sharp summons startled them both, and called in the unwilling girl.

"Why can't they let her alone when she is happy?" he said to himself on such occasions. "Women are so spiteful."

But when Mrs. Eastwood was otherwise engaged, or forgot, or got tired, as people will do, of constant interference, Innocent would stay with him as long as he pleased, saying scarcely anything—content only to be with him—making no demands on his attention. Sometimes she would lean her cheek softly against his arm, or clasp her hands upon it, with a touching, silent demonstration of her dependence.

"I am afraid they are not very kind to you," he would say, bending over her, in intervals when he had roused himself from more serious thought.

But Innocent made no accusation; she said, "I like you best," leaning upon him. Her mind was absolutely as her name. She thought of nothing better or higher in life than thus to be allowed to wander about with Frederick, doing whatever he might want of her, accepting his guidance with implicit faith. He had been the first to take possession of her forlorn and half-stupefied mind, and no one else had room as yet to enter in.

This, as may be supposed, made Mrs. Eastwood very seriously uneasy, and produced remonstrances to which Frederick in his preoccupied condition paid not the slightest attention.

One evening, however, when he had come to the very verge of the crisis, she went out in the twilight, and took her son's arm.

"If you must have a companion, Frederick," she said, attempting a laugh, "I am the safest. You cannot turn my head, or have your own turned. I wish you would pay a little attention to what I say to you."

"Mother," he said breathlessly, finding himself forced at last into the resolution he had so long kept at arm's length; "for the moment it is you who must listen to me."

She was startled by the vehemence of his tone; but kept her composure. "Surely," she said, "I am always ready—when you have any thing to say to me, my dear."

"I have something to say—and yet nothing—nothing particular," he cried. "The fact is that circumstances—have made me think lately—of the possibility—of marrying——"

He brought out the last words with something of a jerk.

"Of—marrying! You, Frederick?"

"Yes, I. Why not? There is no reason, that I know of, why I should not marry. There are Nelly and Molyneux setting me the

example. She is a great deal younger than I am, and he has nothing. I do not know what there should be to prevent me——"

"Nothing, my dear," said Mrs. Eastwood softly; "but before such an idea enters into a young man's head there are generally preliminaries. You intend to marry somebody in particular? not just the first that comes in your way?"

"You mean that I should have determined upon the person before I suggest the event?" said Frederick. "One does naturally, I suppose; but let us imagine that to be done, and there still remains a great deal to do."

"Is this all you can tell me, Frederick?" said his mother, aghast.

"Well, perhaps it is not all. It is all I have any right to tell you, for I have taken no decisive steps. You must be aware, mother, that before I do so I must ascertain what your intentions are—what you are willing to do for me. I can't live with a wife and an establishment upon what I have. You would not like, I presume, to see your son in a back street, with a maid-of-all-work, living upon next to nothing."

"Frederick, you have never given me any reason to suppose that you were thinking of this; you have taken me by surprise. I cannot tell you all in a moment without any warning, without the least indication—Frederick, for heaven's sake," cried Mrs. Eastwood, struck by sudden terror, "tell me who is the lady! do not keep me in this suspense. You cannot surely mean——"

She was about to say Innocent; but with natural delicacy she paused, looking anxiously at him.

"I don't mean anybody that you have seen," he said impatiently. "What is the use of going into particulars? If I told you her name a hundred times over you would be none the wiser."

"I am the wiser already. I am relieved of one fear," said Mrs. Eastwood; "but, Frederick, more than ever, if this is the case, you ought to be careful about that poor child. How can you tell what fancies you are putting into her head? You have made me most anxious, both on your account and hers."

"Pshaw! Mother, I wish you would put away those womanish notions of yours, and for once understand what a man is thinking of when he has a serious object in hand. Dismiss all this nonsense about that baby Innocent. If she is a little fool, is it my fault?"

"If I was in your position, Frederick, I should feel it to be serious, and very much my fault."

"Good heavens! this is how you treat a man when he wants to talk to you seriously. Will you pay a little attention to me for once without dragging in somebody else?"

"I have paid too much attention to you one time and another," said Mrs. Eastwood; "and unless you can speak to your mother, *Frederick, with proper respect*——"

"*Oh dear, yes,* certainly, as much as you like," he cried. "I

don't suppose you want me to say honoured madam, or go down on my knees for your blessing."

There was a moment of silence, during which the fumes of this little quarrel dissipated themselves. He did not want to quarrel—it was contrary to his interests. And neither did she.

"We need not make a fuss about it," he said, in a subdued tone. "It is natural enough. I shall be seven-and-twenty presently, which is not so unripe an age. I have got on well enough hitherto living at home, though I have never had a penny to spare, and I daresay there are a few debts here and there to look up; but, of course, if I married, the thing would be simply impossible. We could not come and live with you here, even if we wished it, and unless you could make a tolerable allowance, of course it is useless for me to think of such a thing."

"A tolerable allowance! Frederick, that is what Mr. Molyneux is asking for Nelly."

"I'd see him at Jericho first," said Frederick; "a miserly old villain, who has money enough to set up a dozen sons. Why should he come to you? I need not point out to you, mother, the very great difference there is between Nelly, who is only your daughter, and myself, the eldest son."

"Has the lady anything?" asked Mrs. Eastwood, skilfully making a diversion. "I hope she is very nice, my dear, and very good, both for your sake and my own; and I would not for the world have you mercenary in your marriage; but still I should like to know—has she anything? I take it for granted she has nice connexions, and every thing else satisfactory."

"I don't know anything about her means," said Frederick, in a lordly and splendid way. "That is a question I never thought of asking. She may be richer than I am, though that is not saying much, or she may not have a penny. I cannot tell you. That is the last thing I should have thought it necessary to ask."

"And indeed you are quite right," said Mrs. Eastwood, faltering. She had herself inculcated this doctrine. Mercenary marriages she had held up many and many a time to the scorn of her family; but it is one thing to make a mercenary marriage, and another to inquire whether the future partner of your days has anything—"for her own sake," said Mrs. Eastwood. But as Frederick was in a disagreeable state of mind, and ready to take offence on the smallest provocation, she did not take up this view of the question. The great revelation itself was the chief thing to be considered. "May I not know something at least about her, Frederick? Where did you meet her? So it is this that has absorbed you so much for some time? I have noticed it, though I did not know what it was. Is she pretty, is she nice? Do I know her? You will not refuse to tell me something about her, my dear."

"I cannot tell you, for there is nothing settled. It would be

unfair to her until I know myself," said Frederick; "but, mother, the first part is entirely within your power. And this is what I wanted—not to pour out any sentimental secrets into your ear, but to ask what I shall have to calculate upon. Of course," said the young man, whose veins were boiling with impatience, "unless I have some satisfactory settlement with you it would be dishonourable for me to open my lips at all."

Mrs. Eastwood was silent. She seemed to have lost the power of utterance. Was Molyneux right after all? Was it to be a struggle to the death from henceforth—the children trying how much they could get, the parent how much she could withhold? She had not heard this suggestion made in words; but something like it she asked herself piteously, confused, and startled, and more shocked at herself for the shock and revulsion of feeling which this demand produced on her than with her son for making it. Was it possible that she was not ready instantly on the spot to give to him and all of them whatever they wanted to make them happy? She had said it of herself, and she believed it, that had they asked for the heart out of her bosom, she would have given it, and a kind of horror of herself fell upon her when she felt for the second time a rising of reluctance and almost resistance within her. On that well-remembered morning when the first appeal of this kind had been made to her, when Frederick had come to her bedside and told her he was ruined, no such feeling had been in her mind. She had cast about instantly what was to be done, and had made her sacrifice, with poignant grief for the cause, yet with a distinct pleasure in the power of succouring her boy. But this demand upon her excited no such feeling. Is it possible that a mother can deny her child anything that is for his good? she had asked often enough—and now she herself was in the position of denying. It struck at the very root of all her past principles of action, of all that she had believed and held by throughout her life. What did she care for in this world except her children? What was there in this world that she would not give up for her children? And yet she had (it was incredible) arrived at a moment when two of them asked a sacrifice from her for their happiness which in the depths of her heart she knew herself unwilling to make.

"You do not make me any answer, mother," said Frederick.

"I cannot all at once," she said, feeling desperately that to gain time was the best she could do. "You forget, Frederick, that I was totally unprepared."

"But you must have foreseen that such a thing would happen some day," he said.

"I ought to have done so, no doubt, but I don't think I had thought of it. Of course I hoped you would both marry," she said *falteringly*. Stray and vague thoughts that the marriage of her *children should not* have involved as a matter of necessity this

attack upon herself floated through her mind—but she was so deeply penetrated by the absolute horror of her own reluctance to satisfy them that she felt unable to suggest any possible blame except to herself.

"I must beg, mother," said Frederick, "that you will not speak of Nelly and myself as if we were exactly in the same position. Nelly has her fortune. Any further demand on her part is quite ridiculous. I, on the other hand, shall have the credit of the family to keep up. I shall actually be the head of the family on your death——"

On your death! Is there any human mind which is not conscious of a startling thrill and wince when these words are said? Mrs. Eastwood nodded her head in acquiescence, but felt as if her son had calmly fitted and fired an arrow which went tingling into her heart. Of course, what he said was quite true.

"I will consider the whole question carefully," she said, in a tone which changed in spite of herself, "and I will ask advice. It is strange to take advice between my children and myself, but you have often told me, Frederick, I did not understand business. I must think it all over carefully before I can give you any answer. I have the boys to consider too."

This she said in a very low tone, not for Frederick, but for herself; for indeed it was at the bar of a private court of her own that she was standing, striving to defend herself, which was not easy. She said this humbly by way of explanation to the judge sitting there, who was a hard judge, and received no weak excuses.

"The boys, pshaw!" said Frederick. "If Dick goes to India, and Jenny into the Church, they are both provided for. I do not see that you need to trouble yourself about the boys——"

"If you had gone into the Church you would have been well provided for," said Mrs. Eastwood. "Jenny may have difficulties too——"

"Oh, I would make short work with Jenny's difficulties!" said Frederick. That was totally a different question. He went on expounding his views to her about his brothers till Mrs. Eastwood found the evening cold, and went in shivering a little and far from happy. She had come to one of the enigmas of life of which the *fin mot* was yet to find, and out of which she could not see her way.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AMANDA.

FREDERICK'S fever had come to a crisis. The next day was Saturday, and, without waiting his mother's answer, he went down to Sterborne in the afternoon. He could wait no longer. Sterborne is a little town with a large old church. It would be almost a village but for the minster, which gives it dignity; and all the people of the place are accustomed to consider their minster as their private property, and to exhibit it to strangers as something in which they themselves have had a hand, and for which thanks are due to them—and not only thanks, but shillings and sixpences. Frederick's arrival at the little inn was accordingly set down without doubt to the attractions of the minster; and while he ate his luncheon the guides who particularly attached themselves to that establishment collected outside, to be ready for his service as soon as he should appear.

"The minster, sir? here you are, sir!" said one sharp small creature, half man, half boy, with elf looks and unnaturally bright eyes. "I'm the reg'lar guide," said another. "Them fellows there don't know nothing—not a single haltar, or the names of the tombs as are all about the place." "I can do do you a rubbing of the brasses, sir." "Here's photographs, sir, of all the favourite aspects."

Thus he was surrounded and beset. He could have knocked them all down, with pleasure, as they struggled in his way; but as that was not practicable, he threw their ranks into utter rout by saying plainly, "I don't want to go to the minster"—a speech which filled the crowd of Sterborne with absolute consternation, and almost produced an insurrection in the place. That any man should profess himself indifferent to the centre of their town and the world startled them beyond measure. "What did he come to Sterborne for, if not to see the minster?" While they dispersed from his path, with an assured conviction in their minds that he must be an infidel and revolutionary, Frederick called the imp who had first offered his services.

"I want to go to Mr. Batty's," he said.

"To old Batty's!" cried the lad, turning a somersault on the spot: "here you are, sir."

"He's going to old Batty's!" cried one of the assistants: and there was a roar of laughter, which Frederick did not understand, but which made him angry by instinct.

"Why did they laugh?" he asked, when he had left that mob *behind him, and* was following his guide through the High *Street.*

"We all laughs at old Batty," was the reply.

"For what reason?" said Frederick sternly: but his conductor only laughed once more. To tell the truth, there was no reason. The ragamuffins of the place had made a custom of it; they "always laughed," but they could give no reason why. Nevertheless, this very circumstance chilled Frederick. It was not powerful enough to stop him in his enterprise, but it chilled him. His old self—his serious self—sprang up at once, and looked his infatuated and impassioned self in the face, and asked him how he would like to be the son-in-law of a man at whom the very ragamuffins laughed. His foolish self replied that the die was cast, that he had committed himself, and had no way of escape—which, indeed, was a mere pretence, since he had as yet neither seen the lady of his love nor any one belonging to her; but it answered his purpose, and stopped the mouth of the gainsayer.

Batty's house was in the outskirts of the little town. It was an old-fashioned house, low and straggling, opening direct from the road, with a little brass-knockered door, raised by one white step from the pavement. The door opened into a long passage, at the end of which was another door, which stood wide open, showing a large garden, green and bright with the afternoon sunshine. Mr. Batty was not at home, the maid informed him who opened the door; but if the gentleman would walk into the drawing-room or the garden she would see whether Miss Batty was visible. Frederick, in his restlessness and the agitation of his mind, preferred the latter, and went into the garden in a strange, tremulous state of excitement, scarcely knowing what he was about.

The house had looked pretty and small from the front, with rows of small twinkling windows and a low roof; but at the back the impression was very different. Various rooms built on to the original *corps du logis* stood out into the lawn, with great bow windows, with green turf at their feet and creeping plants mantling about them. One of these, evidently the drawing-room, displayed handsome and luxurious furniture, of a tasteless but costly kind, through the softly fluttering lace curtains. The garden itself was large and beautifully cared for, showing both wealth and understanding. This gave a little comfort to Frederick's mind, for gardening is an aristocratic taste. He pleased himself with thinking that perhaps this was Amanda's doing; for no one could suspect Batty himself of caring so much for mere beauty. He walked about the beds and bosquets with a surprised sense of pleasure, finding the surroundings so much more graceful than he had hoped—and began to feel that his passion was thus justified. Presently she would appear, and fill those paths with light. It would be very different from the aspect under which she appeared in the London hotel. Here she was at home, surrounded by circumstances which she herself had moulded, which were sweetly adapted to her: and here for the first

time he could see her as she was. A hope of something better than he had yet known, better than he deserved, stole over Frederick's mind, he had fallen in love with mere beauty—that beauty which is but skin deep, and which all moralists preach against. Could it be that in so doing he was to find goodness, good taste, and refinement too?

While he was thus musing, the sound of voices reached him from one of the open windows. It was a warm afternoon, almost like summer. A glimmer of firelight made itself visible in at least two of the rooms, and in both of these the windows were open. Frederick had no intention of eavesdropping, but when he heard the voice which he remembered so well he pricked up his ears. I am afraid there are few lovers who would not have done so. At first the talking was vague—not clear enough to reach him; but after a while it became louder in tone. The first to make itself heard was a voice which whimpered and complained, "After twenty years' work for him and his: twenty years!" it said; and it wavered about as if the speaker was walking up and down the room with agitation. Sometimes she would stand still, and address the person to whom she was speaking, varying from complaint to anger. Frederick did not know this voice. It was only when another speaker burst in, in a still louder tone, that the situation became at all clear to him. The second voice rang at once into his heart. It was melodious enough in its ordinary sound—a round, full voice, not without sweetness; but something altogether new and unexpected came into it with these sharper and louder tones,—

"You are free to go away whenever you choose," Amanda cried. "I will not be troubled like this. You know what all the doctors have said, and how wicked it is to worry me. No one can know better than you do. You are a wretch; you have no kindness, no feeling. Because you have quarrelled with papa you want to kill me. What is the use of bullying me? You know you can go as soon as ever you please. Go and be done with it. You are always threatening, always saying what you will do——"

"Go!" said the other. "Oh, 'Manda, you to speak of feeling! when I have been here twenty years, and taken care of you from your childhood. But you are as cold and as hard as a millstone, though you are so pretty. Oh, if people only knew how you can talk, and how heartless you are, and the things you say to your mother's own sister—her that has brought you up and taken care of you for twenty years!"

"Taken care of me, indeed," cried Amanda; "any servant could have taken care of me. You have been a nuisance since ever I can recollect: always reminding one that mamma was not a *lady, and pulling* us down as far as you could. What were you? *Nothing but a lady's* maid. Here you've been tried to be made a

lady of, and had handsome dresses given you, and all sorts of things. Of course it was for our own sakes. What was there in you to make us take any trouble? You are old, you are plain, and vulgar, and disagreeable. What right have you to be kept like a lady in pa's house? You are only good enough to scrub the floor. Why have you always stayed on when nobody wanted you? I suppose you thought you might marry pa when ma was dead and gone, though it's against the law. Of course that was what you wanted—to be mistress of the house, and get him under your thumb, and rule over me. Try it, aunty! You won't find me so easy to rule over! Just try! An old, ugly, vulgar, spiteful creature, with no recommendation and no character——"

"'Manda, 'Manda," cried the other, "Oh, don't be so cruel!——"

"I will be cruel, if you call that cruel. There's more than that coming. What is the good of you, but to make a slave and a drudge of? Why should pa keep you but for that? Aunty, indeed! He was a fool ever to let me call you so. And so he is a soft-hearted fool, or he never would have kept you on for years and years. If he had but asked me, you should have been packed off ages ago. You to put on airs, indeed, and say you won't do anything you're told to do! Go, this minute, you wicked woman, and don't worry me. Fancy, me! to sit here and listen to you as if you were worthy to be listened to—you who are no better than the dirt under my feet."

"'Manda, you dare to speak like that to your own flesh and blood!"

"I dare do a great deal more," cried Amanda. "I dare to turn you out of doors, bag and baggage; and I will, if you don't mind. You old Jezebel—you old hag, as pa says—you horrid painted witch—you wicked woman! Get out of my sight, or I'll throw something at you—I will! Go away! If you are not gone in one moment—you witch—you old hag——"

Here a smash of something breaking told that the gentle Amanda had kept her word. There was a suppressed cry, a scuffle, a scream, and then the bell was rung violently.

"Oh, I suppose it's my fault," cried the other voice, with a whimpering cry. "Bring the bottle out of her room—the one at her bedside. Give me the eau-de-cologne. Here's she been and fainted. Quick! Quick! 'Manda! I didn't mean it, dear! I don't mind! Manda! Lord, you were red enough just now—don't look so dead white!"

Was it Frederick's guardian angel that had made him an auditor of this scene? The loud voice declaiming, the string of abusive words, the clash of the missile thrown, were horrible and strange to him as the language of demons. He was thunderstruck. Her language had not always been pleasant to him, but he was not prepared for anything like this. He walked up and down in a state

of mind which it would be impossible to describe. His first impulse was flight. There was still time for him to get away altogether, to escape from this horrible infatuation, to escape from her and her dreadful father, and everything belonging to her. Should he go? Then he reflected he had given his card, and so far compromised himself. Was this sufficient to detain a man who had just been subjected to the hardest trial in the world, a sudden disgust for the woman whom he thought he loved? Frederick stood still, he paused, his heart was rent in two. He was within reach of her, almost within sight of her, and must he go without seeing her, unworthy as she might be? It was not necessary, he said to himself, that anything should follow, that he should carry out the intention with which he came. That was impossible—however lovely and sweet and fair she might be, he would not take a low-bred termagant into his bosom. No, no! that was over for ever. But how could he go without seeing her, after he had given his card and announced himself? This would be to expose himself to her wrath and her father's, in whose power to some extent he was. He could hear the voices through the open window as he wandered about the garden, arguing with himself. Should he go? Should he stay? Strangely enough, though he had been told that agitation might be fatal to her, he was not anxious about her, though he surmised that she had fainted. His disgust took this form. If she were ill after her outbreak, she deserved it. On the whole he was almost pleased that she should be ill. She had humiliated him as well as herself, and he had a vindictive satisfaction in feeling that she was punished for it; but further than this he did not go. No; of course all was over; he could never be her suitor, never ask her to give him the hand with which she had thrown something which crashed and broke at her companion's head. Never! that was over; but why should not he see her, behold her beauty once more—give himself that last pleasure? He would never seek her again; she had disgusted, revolted, turned his mind away from her. But since he was already so near, since he had given his card, since it would be known at once why he went away, this once, not for love, but for scornful gratification of his contemptuous admiration, just as he would look at a statue or picture, he would see her again.

This was the foolish reasoning with which he subdued the wiser instinct that prompted him to fly. Why should he fly? A woman capable of speaking, acting, thinking as this woman had done, could no longer have any power over a man who, whatever might be his moral character, had still the tastes and impulses of a gentleman. She had made an end of her sway over him, he thought; that dream could never come back again. Nobody but a madman would ask such a creature to marry him. To marry him? to be *taken to* his mother's house, and promoted into the society of *gentlefolk? Never!* He laughed bitterly at the notion. But,

thank Heaven! he had not betrayed himself. Thank Heaven! that merely to see her would commit him to nothing. No, he ended by convincing himself the most manly course was to pay his visit as if nothing had happened, to see the syren who was no longer a syren to him, but only a beautiful piece of flesh and blood, whom he might look at and admire like a statue. This was, he repeated to himself, the most manly course. The phrase was pleasant to him. To run away would look as if he had no confidence in his own moral force and power of resisting temptation. But the fact was that there could be no longer any temptation in the matter. To see her, and prove to himself that disgust had altogether destroyed the fierce violent wild love which had swallowed up all his better resolution, was the only manly course to take.

He was standing by one of the flower-beds, stamping down unconsciously with his boot the border of long-leaved crocuses which had gone out of flower, but quite unaware of the damage he was doing, when the maid who admitted him came back. She apologized for keeping him so long waiting. Miss 'Manda had been taken bad sudden—one of her bad turns—nothing out of the common—but now was better, and would he go up-stairs, please?

"Was she well enough to see him?" Frederick asked, with a momentary thrill of alarm, feeling his heart begin to beat.

"Oh, quite well enough. They don't last long, these bad turns. You will find her a bit shaken, sir, and she didn't ought to be excited or put out, but she's better," said the maid. Better! the scold, the termagant, the beautiful fury; but still Frederick's heart beat at the thought of seeing her again.

She was lying on a sofa close to the open window, looking very pale and languid, just as she had been on that delicious evening which he had last spent in her company, looking as if nothing but gentle words could ever come out of those lovely lips. The woman whom she had called Aunty, and whom she had been abusing, sat by her holding a white hand, which looked as if it had been modelled in ivory. Was that the hand? One of poor aunty's cheeks was red as fire, as if she had been struck on it, and she had evidently been crying. But she was full of solicitude for her charge, placing the cushions behind her comfortably, and whispering and soothing her. Frederick asked himself if he had been in a dream. Amanda held out her other hand to him with gentle languor, and smiled at him an angelic smile.

"Is it really you, Mr. Frederick Eastwood?" she said. "We have been wondering over your card. I could not think what could keep you here. Are you staying at the Court? But Sir Geoffrey is not at home——"

"No! I had business in this part of the country, and thought I

would avail myself of your father's invitation—that is for an hour or two. I must return to town to-night," he answered, proud of his own fortitude, but feeling, oh, such a melting and dissolving of all his resolutions.

"That is a very short visit; but I hope papa may be able to persuade you to stay longer," said Amanda. "You do not mind my receiving you on the sofa? I have been ill. Oh, you must not be too sorry for me," she added, laughing, "it was my own fault,—entirely my own fault. I allowed myself to get into a passion. I am sure you never did such a thing. Mr. Eastwood, is it not shocking? I got angry at poor Aunty, here. Yes, I deserve to be whipped, I know I do,—and I always am punished, though not more than I deserve. They told me you were in the garden. I am so much ashamed of myself,—did you know, Mr. Eastwood, what a naughty, naughty girl I was?"

"I heard—something," said Frederick, feeling all his armour of proof, all his moral courage drop from him. This fair creature, pale with agitation and exhaustion, smiling softly from her pillow,—caressing the hand of her homely attendant,—confessing her fault, this a termagant, a scold, a fury! The thing was ridiculous. Let him disbelieve his ears, his eyes, all his senses, rather than give up his faith in her.

"I don't know how to look you in the face," said Amanda, putting up her disengaged hand to hide herself. "Oh, I know I have been so very naughty. Please forgive me. It makes me so ill always. I am not let off. I get my punishment, but not more than I deserve——"

"Don't speak of punishment!" said Frederick. He was ready to pledge his honour that no word which was not good and gentle could have come from those lips. Miss 'Manda sighed softly and shook her head.

"I have not a good temper. I never had. Unless it is born with you, you can never get it by trying,—and then when I am agitated it makes me ill. Nobody must ever cross me, you know, Mr. Eastwood, or some day or other I shall die——. It is dreadful to think you may die any day without having a moment's time to prepare." She rounded off this doleful anticipation with a gentle sigh. She lay back upon her pillows with her colour beginning to come back, but with a delightful gravity on her face. She throw an inkstand at any one? it was totally impossible,—though, indeed, there was a black mark on the carpet which a maid was mopping up, and a stain of ink on the front of Aunty's dress; but this must have been accidental. Frederick looked at her and forgot his knowledge of the world, and threw away his independent judgment and the evidence of his senses. It must have been a *mistake.* He had all but seen it with his own eyes, but he felt it *could not be true.* If it had been true, would the assailed woman,

she with the stain on her dress, be sitting by Amanda's side, still holding her hand, and soothing her? It must have been an accident. Nothing more easy than to push over an inkstand from a table. It was the simplest accident. He suggested it to himself first, and then he believed it strenuously. He drew his chair close by the sofa, and asked what he could do to amuse her. Could he read to her?—what could he do?

"Oh, no,—if you can only stay for an hour or two, talk to me," said Amanda, "tell me about town. I hate this horrid little place, where nothing ever happens. When any one dies it keeps us quite lively. That is the only kind of amusement we can get. Yes, Mr. Eastwood, sit there,—you have town written all over you. It is so nice to see any one from London; tell me how the parks are looking, and what ladies are most talked of, and what sort of dress is being worn. Tell me if there is any gossip going, or stories about anybody in high life.—Oh, I am so glad you have come to-day when I want rousing up. Do tell me all the London news."

Frederick, to do him justice, was not much learned in London news. Having been brought up by a good mother, he hesitated to repeat to this young woman the stories he had heard at his club; for there are always stories floating on the surface of society, and they are always to be had at the club. After a while, moved by her persuasion, he did tell her some of them, to her intense interest and gratification,—a gratification which aroused Frederick's pleasure in telling, and made him forget his scruples. And while he amused her, and received the flattering reward of her interest and attention, he was again inflamed and taken possession of by her beauty. Everything in the shape of reason melted out of his mind as he sat by Amanda's side. All that he thought of was how to secure her,—how soon he could marry, and bind to himself that beautifulest form, that fairest face. If these had been the days when rash proceedings were possible, Frederick felt that it was in him to have carried her away to his den, as a wild beast carries his prey. The first moment that it was possible, as soon as they were left alone together, he poured out the story of his passion. He could not live without her, he said,—to go away again,—to tear himself from her side was an insupportable idea. Would not she have pity upon him? Thus this foolish young man, notwithstanding all warnings, notwithstanding the immediate interposition of providence and his guardian angel to save him from it, rushed upon his fate.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT THE FAMILY THOUGHT.

AMANDA was not so eager as her lover. She held back. To do her justice, though she was glad of the prospect of marrying a gentleman, and doubly glad, for reasons of her own, to have an Eastwood at her feet, she was in no hurry to secure him; nor did she show any unbecoming exultation in her conquest. Her father did, who had set his heart on the match. But Amanda had too much confidence in her own charms and superiority to be unduly elated, or to give her consent without all the hesitation which she thought necessary to her dignity. I need not say that Frederick stayed till Monday—till the last practicable moment; that he loathed her father and everything surrounding him more and more deeply every hour; and that his devotion to herself increased in heat and strength, through all her coquettings, her doubtfulness as to whether she liked him or not, and incapacity for making up her mind.

"I have known you such a little while," she said.

"And I have known you such a little while," cried Frederick.

"But that is quite different," she said demurely, casting down her eyes; "a woman's happiness depends on it so much more than a man's."

This was a pretty speech entirely in her *rôle;* but as coming from a woman who the other day had thrown an inkstand at somebody's head, the reader may perhaps be doubtful how far it is true. But it made Frederick more mad with passion than ever. The more she held back, the more eagerly he pressed and urged his suit. For this there were other reasons besides his love. He was a proud man, notwithstanding all the many voluntary humiliations to which he stooped, and Batty was insupportable to him. He despised and hated and loathed the man who knew his weakness, and had thrust himself into his confidence. He would have loathed any man who had done so; but every point in Batty's character exaggerated the intensity of his feeling. His warm cordiality, his friendliness, his satisfaction and good wishes, made Frederick recoil as from something poisonous and unclean. He could hardly restrain himself even while Amanda held his "fate" in her hands. Once the decision was made, he determined to lose no time—to press for an immediate marriage—to carry her away out of this man's reach—anywhere; he did not care where, to get rid of him at *any* cost. And with the usual folly of men under such circumstances, *he actually* believed that he should be able to do this; that *he could impose his* will upon Batty, and mould Amanda to his

way of thinking; and that from the moment when he succeeded in marrying her, all would be right. He could crush all the bonds of nature; he could subdue temper and disposition, and triumph over circumstances. All these Frederick was quite ready to tackle, and did not doubt his power to overcome. The first step was the only thing that depended upon another; but when Amanda had consented—when she was his—then everything would become easy and plain. In the meantime, however, he was received as lover on probation, and had to make a number of pilgrimages Saturday after Saturday before the decision was at last formally made in his favour. During this time his family were in the dark, knowing little about Frederick. I need not say that their curiosity and ingenuity were warmly roused to find out his secret. This anxiety took a more practical form in the mind of Dick and in that of Molyneux, to whom, of course, Nelly had communicated the family perplexity, than in those of the ladies themselves, who did not know how to find out anything except in the legitimate way. Molyneux, however, managed by accident to stumble against Frederick at the railway station, and thus discovered where he went; while Dick by means of one of his fellow victims, who was reading with him under the same "coach," procured a natural history of Sterborne of an exhaustive character. When the name of Batty was mentioned, Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly looked at each other, and the whole became clear to them. They had not forgotten the name which they had but once heard. A great beauty—the daughter of a country doctor. Now, indeed, everything became clear.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, mamma," said Dick; "Trevor has often asked me to go home with him on a Saturday. I'll go—and I'll manage to see her, and bring you back the news."

There was an eager assent on all sides to this proposition; and the mind of the family was kept in much suspense until Dick's return. For, as Mrs. Eastwood justly remarked, a country doctor might be anything; it might mean a gentleman, highly considered and well to do; or it might mean a bustling little country practitioner, with no position of any sort. Without further information it was quite impossible to divine which of these two were meant; and everything depended upon the clearing up of the question. As for Molyneux, he was disposed to take the very gloomiest view of the matter. He thought that Frederick should be "spoken to," and remonstrated with. The son of a Q.C., hoping shortly to be the son of a judge, does not look forward with any pride or satisfaction to the thought of becoming connected with "a country doctor." Ernest argued that a man of high standing would never have been so described; a country doctor, he declared, could mean nothing but the most homely specimen of the profession—the workhouse doctor, the village apothecary. He was uneasy on the subject. He thought Mrs. Eastwood ought to be "very firm," and

that Frederick, for his own good, should have all the disadvantages of such a mésalliance pointed out to him.

"It is not only a man's own comfort that is destroyed, but that of all his connexions," said Molyneux; "everybody belonging to him suffers," and he insisted once more very sharply on the duty of the mother to be "firm," so strongly, indeed, that Mrs. Eastwood took offence, though she did not say anything direct on the subject.

"Ernest seems to be afraid that his connexion with us may do him harm in the world," she permitted herself once to say to Nelly.

"Oh, mamma, why do you judge Ernest so harshly?" cried the poor girl. But Nelly, too, felt that if Frederick should marry the daughter of a country doctor, her own lover would be deeply annoyed; and she, too, was wounded and offended by this, though perhaps unreasonably. So many of the feelings which make our weal or woe are unreasonable, and not to be excused.

The household awaited Dick's return with much anxiety. He came up by a very early train, with a cold in his head, and misanthropical tendencies generally. And Dick's report was not such as made the family more happy.

"I met Frederick yesterday," he said. "The fellow accused me of coming to spy upon him. I asked him how I was to know where he went to amuse himself in secret? I was at the Trevors', where I had often been asked. He blessed me, and that was all; he dared not say any more. But wasn't he in a rage! I did not feel very nice myself; for after all I was a kind of spy."

"Indeed, I never thought of it in that light," said his mother. "You went to find out something about Miss Batty—not to spy upon Frederick."

"Oh, Miss Batty! Miss Batty!" cried Dick; the recollection took away his power of speech. "She is a big, fat, fleshy sort of a creature, with red cheeks, and fuzzy hair in her eyes," said Dick, "a fringe of it hanging over her forehead, as you see some queer people in the streets; said forehead about an inch high, dimples in her fat cheeks, and that sort of thing. A figure like a feather-bed, with something tied round the middle to make a waist. Beautiful! if that is what you call beauty!"

Dick's taste was towards the slim and slight. This was his way of representing all Juno or Rubens-like beauty. Amanda's magnificent sweep of shoulder and limb, her splendid fulness, represented to him weight and fat, nothing more. I need not attempt to describe the cries of dismay with which his mother and sister received this description. Mrs. Eastwood gave a scream, when he came to talk of Amanda's figure, and put her handkerchief to her eyes. As for Nelly, she took her brother by the shoulders and shook him, as *much as it was in her* power to do.

"You are not giving us a true account," she said. "Mamma, don't mind him; it is plain he likes tiny people best. Tell us the truth, you wicked boy, I am sure she is handsome; she must be handsome, even from what you say."

"As you like," said Dick; "it is all the same to me."

"She is like a lady at least?"

"Well, if you think that is like a lady. She must weigh twelve stone; not an ounce less."

"If that is all you have to say against her," said Mrs. Eastwood, who was herself a good weight; "but, Dick, dear, don't talk any more nonsense. People have different ideas about beauty. And her father, the doctor? Is he a proper sort of person? Is he a gentleman? So much will depend upon that."

"Her father, the doctor!" said Dick, with increasing contempt. He made a pause before he said any more to increase the effect. "He is a vet, and a horse-dealer, and a man without a bit of character, the jest of the place."

Mrs. Eastwood gave a painful cry. Nelly echoed it feebly, standing in the middle of the room, with her face suddenly like ashes. Nelly's mind was not primarily concerned with Frederick. The idea which flashed through it was, must Ernest know this? must he be told? She felt the humiliation keenly, with a pang such as she had never known before. It would humiliate her before him. He would feel humiliated by his connexion with her. For the moment it seemed to Nelly too bitter to be borne.

"Are you quite sure, Dick?" she said faltering. "Is there no mistake?"

"I will write to old Miss Eastwood," said the mother. It was something to be able to get up, to hurry to her desk, to feel that she could do something, could inquire, at least, and was not compelled to sit down idle after receiving such news.

"What good can old Miss Eastwood do?" said Dick, who felt the authenticity of his own report to be called in question; and, indeed, old Miss Eastwood could do no good; to write to her to get further information seemed a kind of ease to the excitement of the moment. Before the letter was finished Mr. Vane came in, to make an innocent call, and hearing where Dick had been and how he had caught such a dreadful cold, proceeded to discourse upon Sterborne, lightly and easily, as strangers often do upon points of deadly interest to their hearers.

"I have been all over that country," he said; "I used to know the Eastwoods, your relations, very well; indeed, I have a little box of a place close to Sterborne, which my sister is rather fond of. The Minster is the great attraction. Out of St. Peter's at Rome, I don't know a service so high—and she goes in for that sort of thing."

"Do you know anybody called Batty?" cried Nelly in her haste.

She had come to have a great confidence in the man who looked at her so kindly, with eyes that had a certain regret in them—regret which flattered and consoled her somehow, she could not tell why.

"Ellinor!" cried Mrs. Eastwood in dismay; but it was too late.

"Batty, oh yes, I know Batty. He is very well known to the ingenuous youth of that part of England," said Mr. Vane, "though I admire and wonder to think you should ask for him. Stop a moment, however, I know; he has a beautiful daughter."

"Then she is beautiful!" cried Nelly.

"Red and white, flesh and blood—big Dutch doll of a thing," cried Dick, thrusting himself into the conversation, in eager self-defence, without thinking of the contradiction in his words.

"I suppose we are all flesh and blood," said Mr. Vane, "but I rather incline to Dick's view of the matter, on the whole. At the same time she is a beautiful creature. I don't believe she has any more soul than Mahomet would allow; but she is the perfection of flesh and blood. By the way, she was once said to be engaged to one of the Eastwoods, I forget which, not Sir Geoffrey, but one of his brothers. I don't know how it was broken off."

"I heard of that too," said Dick, putting on an air of injured virtue; "you listen to all he says, but you don't put any faith in me."

"No, I can't tell you exactly how it was broken off," Mr. Vane went on, trying to recollect the details which might, he thought, interest in an easy way the relations of Charlie Eastwood. "But these stories are always disagreeable," he added, "there is sure to be something discreditable on one side or the other. It is a blessing, however, to know that he did get out of it, which was the chief thing to be desired."

In the dead pause that followed, in the look of despair which was exchanged between Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly, and the absence of all response to what he said, Vane, who was quick-witted, felt instinctively that something more was involved. He turned the conversation at once to other channels, and after a while Mrs. Eastwood withdrew with Dick, whose cold was becoming more and more demonstrative. When they had left the room there was another pause, which Mr. Vane made no haste to break, for if Nelly chose to be confidential with the man who was a "connexion," as he thought she had once or twice shown an inclination to be, John Vane was very far from having any objection. On the contrary, he was disposed to cherish the inclination. He was "interested" in Nelly. He thought there was a dissatisfaction and confused want in her, which it was sad to see. He thought Ernest Molyneux not half worthy of such a girl, and wondered *what she* could see in him; and if he himself could be of any com*fort or help to Nelly*, why, what was the good of him but to be of

use? He waited, leaving her to speak, to ask his advice, or confide in him, if she chose.

"About this Mr. Batty?" she said hastily. "Oh, Mr. Vane, pardon me for troubling you. You say it was a blessing that Charlie Eastwood got out of his engagement. I hate that way of talking, as if a girl's happiness went for nothing. But I don't think you meant that; is this Mr. Batty such a man that to be connected with him would be a disgrace?"

"Disgrace is a strong word," said Vane. "I do not think I would use such a violent expression; but as a matter of feeling, I would rather not be connected with him; and pardon me if I say what perhaps may shock you—I would like still less to be connected with her."

"The girl?"

"Yes, the girl. It sounds brutal, I know; but she is just the kind of girl whom one would tremble to have anything to do with. Beautiful, passionate, uneducated, undisciplined, taught to think of nothing but the gratification of the moment. I am afraid of such a creature. The Lorelei is a joke to her. When you got into the hands of the syrens you were doomed, and there was an end of you; but a woman like that with the command of a man's life——"

"Oh, Mr. Vane!" cried Nelly, with her hands clasped, following every movement of his lips with her eyes, breathless in her interest; and then she burst suddenly into hot, momentary tears, and cried, "Poor Frederick! Poor Frederick!" wringing her hands.

Mr. Vane got up hurriedly from his chair. "Miss Eastwood, don't think I heard you, or will ever recollect, or attempt to connect with what we have been saying"—he began. Then looking at Nelly, who was crying, the man's heart melted within him. "If it will do you any good or give you any ease, tell me," he said, going up to her, and standing behind her; "you may trust me never to say anything."

"Oh, yes, I can trust you," said Nelly; and then clasped her hands, and looked up at him. "You are a man; you are a connexion; you are supposed to know better than we women do. Could *you* speak to him, Mr. Vane?"

He looked at her again, and shook his head. What could he say? "I am not a friend, and no one but a friend could interfere. Even a friend would not be listened to in such a case," he said; and then he added, "If he loves her, he may have an influence upon her; he may be able to make something better of her. And your influence and your mother's——"

Poor Nelly shivered. "It is not entirely of Frederick I am thinking," she said with a low, suppressed moan; "I am selfish too."

Mr. Vane seized his hat suddenly, and shook hands with her, and rushed away! Nelly could not imagine why. She thought he was unfeeling, and she was very, very vexed and angry with herself for having confided in him. The last words had escaped her in spite of herself; but, then, he could attach no meaning to them, she was sure.

When Frederick came home that evening there was a grand *éclaircissement*, not of a perfectly peaceable nature. He accused his mother of having sent Dick as a spy after him to find out his movements, an accusation which had a certain truth in it. Dick fortunately was shut up in his room with his cold, so that no quarrel between the brothers was possible. When Frederick intimated that he was an accepted lover, and that his marriage was to take place in six weeks, his mother and sister made an appeal to him, into which I need not enter. After a little fine indignation and heroic defence of his Amanda, Frederick became *attendri*, and gave her up to them as a burnt offering, and presented himself in the aspect of a martyr of honour, as men are in the habit of doing; and they ended by taking his part, and weeping over him, and consoling him. They agreed to endeavour to "make the best of it," to "stand by the poor boy." Where is the family that has not in one way or other had a similar task to perform?

There was but one other member of the house by whom the intelligence had yet to be received. Innocent heard it without any appearance of emotion. She had been wistfully curious about Frederick's absence, and had wandered about the garden disconsolately in the evenings, baffling by her strange deadness and silence all the attempts which the others made to replace him. Jenny, who had by this time come home for the holidays, did more for her than any of the others. He announced in the family that he meant to experiment upon her; he took her out into the avenue, and declaimed Homer to her, to try what effect would be produced,—and he said she liked it; I am of opinion also that she did. She had begun to feel a certain solace in company so long as no response was demanded from her, and no attempt made to interest her and make her take part in feelings and opinions totally unknown. Jenny and his Greek were a consolation to her; she did not understand, therefore she would not be asked to feel, and he required no answer. She went through two or three days of this after Frederick's marriage was announced, and I suppose in the silence her faltering thoughts took shape; for Jenny was nothing to her, nor Ellinor, nor their mother, no one but Frederick—and slowly she began to feel that this strange new event would separate her from him. It was from Dick that at last she asked help for the solution of her thoughts.

"Frederick is to be married," she said, addressing him one day *when they happened* to be alone. It was in the garden, which in

summer was the home of the family, and the slow, lingering spring had changed into summer that year almost in a day.

Dick was almost as much surprised as if the lime-tree under which he sat had suddenly disclosed a questioning Dryad. "Frederick? yes, he is going to be married, more fool he," cried Dick, shutting up, on the chance of conversation, the book which he did not love.

"What does it mean?" said Innocent again. She had come to his side, and was standing by, questioning him with her great, steady eyes. The good young fellow thought to himself that she must be an absolute fool to ask such a question, and did not know what to reply.

"Mean?—" he said confused, casting about for words.

"Does it mean that he will go away from here?" said Innocent, "I do not know English ways. Will he go away,—will he have her with him instead? Will he never come back, never to live, to be here always? That is what I want to know."

"Of course not," said Dick. "Why any child knows that when a man marries he goes away with his wife to a house of his own."

"Will Frederick have a house of his own?"

"Of course,—I suppose so,—if he can afford it," said Dick.

"And she will be with him always?" she asked in a musing tone.

Upon which Dick burst into a great laugh, which silenced Innocent; but she had not the least idea why he laughed. Her mind was too much intent upon one subject to mind anything else. Frederick had brought a photograph of his betrothed to exhibit to his mother, and Innocent was seen bending over it and examining it long and closely. Next morning it was found on the table torn up into little fragments. The house was disturbed by this, for Frederick gave his mother and sister credit for the destruction of the image of his love, and accused them of want of consideration for himself, and many another sin against his mightiness. Both the accused ladies, however, suspected how it was; Innocent had torn it up quickly and quietly after she had looked at it. She had done it with no vindictiveness, but with a quiet solemnity, like an administration of justice. "Why did you tear it up?" Nelly said to her, a day or two later.

"Because I do not like her," said the girl steadily, not rejecting the blame.

"But, Innocent, though we may dislike people, we cannot destroy them—nor even their portraits," said Nelly.

"No," said Innocent, "but it would be better if she could be destroyed," she added, speaking low.

"Hush,—hush,—why do you say so? She has not done anything wrong——"

Innocent made no immediate answer. Her face had changed

from its wistful blank to an almost haggard look of sadness and pain. She turned away from Nelly, who was half angry and half sympathetic. The strange thing which they could not understand was, that she had no apparent anger against Frederick, or painful feeling towards him. She was not angry. A sinking sense of loneliness came over her when she thought of his departure, but no offence against him.—She was as ready as ever to go to him in the garden, to walk with him, to cling to his arm.—Once, even, she ventured to do what no one else did,—she remonstrated. This was within a few days of his marriage, when all opposition was stopped, and nobody made any attempt to change the inevitable. They had been walking up and down together for some time, he saying nothing, she to all appearances passive as usual,—when, quite suddenly, without any warning, she spoke.

"Frederick! I wish you would not marry.—Why should you marry and go away? I do not like her face. If I had known that you would go away, I should have stayed in Pisa. Cannot you give it up?—I do not like you to marry. Oh, stay with us, stay!"

Frederick had stared at her when she began,—now he burst into fits of unconquerable laughter. There was something insulting in its tone which touched some chord in Innocent's nature. She went away from him without a word, and for days spoke to him no more.

CHAPTER XXV.

AFTER A YEAR.

IT is impossible for any story, unless comprised within a very short space, to be written in full detail, and therefore I must beg the gentle reader to pardon me if I pass over a little more than a year, jumping over the marriage of Frederick Eastwood and all its attendant circumstances, which, indeed, was not pleasant to dwell upon. To make this event possible Mrs. Eastwood had to sacrifice a portion of her income, which she did with a pained and miserable sense of unwillingness. It would be impossible for anything to have been more repulsive or disagreeable to her than the marriage itself, and yet she had to subtract largely from her own living to render it possible. I cannot rightly tell why she did not resist this claim. It was partly, I think, out of horror at herself for being reluctant to sacrifice anything or everything to secure "the happiness" of one of *her* children—a fictitious motive, but one which had great force with *her*. *The consequence* was that old Brownlow, who had seen all

the children grow up, and to whose services and lectures they had been used all their lives, had to be "put down" like the carriage. Mrs. Eastwood could no longer afford a costly and solemn butler; she laughed tremulously at the idea that this was a grievance, and declared aloud that she had always preferred having maids to wait at table. But it was a grievance, for Brownlow was an old and faithful servant, upon whom Mrs. Eastwood had relied much, and he married the cook, also a most important functionary in the house, and disordered the establishment from top to bottom. Nobody but the Molyneuxes thought the less of Mrs. Eastwood because the door at The Elms was now opened by a nice-looking maid; but *they* did note her descent in the social scale, and this was very irksome to her. Brownlow became the greengrocer of the district, and was always at hand round the corner among the beetroots and cabbages, ready to respond to any call, and to wait at all the dinner-parties; but still it was not the same thing as having a man in the house. No carriage and no butler! These things she had given up for Frederick, and what was she to give up for Nelly when the time came? The fact was, however, that Nelly would not allow the time to come. Things remained almost exactly in the same position as they had done at the beginning of this story, so far as Nelly was concerned. Ernest Molyneux still went and came, occasionally taking upon himself the aspect of son of the house, but quite as often making himself generally disagreeable, making speeches which were sharply sarcastic or ill-tempered, under the guise of civility, to Mrs. Eastwood, and torturing Nelly with heats and chills of feeling. He had taken no step to make the marriage possible in his own person. He was as idle as ever, lounging about his clubs and The Elms, interfering with all their arrangements, a man with nothing to do. Now and then he wrote an article in the *Piccadilly* or in the *Daily Treasury*, and thus kept up the character of being a literary man, and making a great deal of money by his writings. But his profession was just as much and as little to him as on the day when he had told Mrs. Eastwood that he would not press for an immediate marriage. He did not press for it now. He felt with all the clear-sightedness of personal extravagance how many disadvantages there would be in having to set up an establishment of his own, and felt that the changes involved would bring more discomfort than additional happiness. A little more of Nelly would be purchased somewhat dearly by the change in position, in money to spend, and in responsibility of every kind; and at present he could have a very sufficient amount of Nelly's society without these attendant troubles. His father, for his part, held himself good-humouredly ready to "do as much as the other side," whenever, as he said, Ernest and his young lady made up their minds, but in the meantime regarded the whole matter with a certain cynical amusement, watching the process by which, as he thought,

"the old mother" staved off the moment when, along with her daughter, she would have to part with some of her money. "Knows the value of money, that future mother-in-law of yours," he would say to Ernest, chuckling; "you don't get it out of her so easily as you do out of me." And this was Ernest's own opinion. To get as much as he could out of her was clearly the principle on which he must go if he married. She was "the other side."

This is, I suppose, a very common state of affairs, and one which is found existing everywhere; but it is difficult to describe the effect it produced in the house where a little while ago each believed himself and herself ready to give up anything or everything for the other, and in which there was but one heart and one aim. Mrs. Eastwood was driven from her old standing-ground altogether. She had no longer any faith in herself or her motives. She felt all the gentle security of well-doing, which had been in her life, to glide away from her. She was not willing, as she thought she had been, to denude herself for her children. Their desire to get as much as they could out of her, revolted her mind and chilled her heart. Frederick had left her in no doubt that this was his sentiment. And Nelly? Could Nelly be of the same mind? Oh, no, not Nelly! but, at least, Ernest, who was to be Nelly's husband, who would take her from her mother, and no doubt persuade her to think with him—at least, when she was his wife. Mrs. Eastwood felt that the virtue upon which she had made her stand, the great principle of her life, no longer animated her, and she no longer believed in herself. She felt that her children were no longer wholly hers, but had become separate, and even antagonist powers thinking chiefly of themselves; and she ceased to believe in them. Thus her entire moral atmosphere was changed, the foundations of the very earth unsettled, the time put out of joint. She groped vainly for something to guide her out of the maze, and found nothing. Her comely face became full of anxious lines, and care crept over her like a cold shadow. This was how the changes, present and to come, in the family existence, affected its head.

Nelly was, if possible, still more painfully divorced from her old gentle ease and sprightly quiet. She had begun life for herself, and the beginning was, like all beginnings, a fight and struggle. The new required her to be faithless and disloyal to the old; the old could not conceal a certain grudge and painful antagonism to the new. She was placed between, feeling herself dragged on either side—dragged asunder, the peaceful unity of her existence turned into a perpetual struggle to please both parties, to serve two masters, to be loyal at once to her lover and to her mother. Nay, the struggle was still more complicated: for Nelly had not only to serve two masters, but to content and satisfy a third party, a new *being* altogether—herself—another Nelly, who had risen up and *sat in judgment upon* her. No inquisitor was ever so hard upon a

poor girl as was this other self—this new, severe, enlightened Nelly, who sat, as it were, at the very springs of her life, and watched them from their earliest outflow. Even when the poor Nelly in the flesh had made what seemed to her a very successful compromise, when she had done her very best, and had pleased both sides, and served both masters, the spiritual Nelly would come down upon her like a wolf on the fold—would convict her of falsehood, of paltering with what she knew to be right, of mean expedients, and a base policy of time-serving. Poor child! it was true she had become a time-server. She said one thing to the one, another to the other. She tried in a hundred little stealthy ways to "bring them together," to resuscitate the ancient friendship between them. She told each of pretty speeches the other had made, and kept a dead silence as to the speeches, anything but pretty, which she had often enough to listen to. Not only was her heart torn asunder, but her mind was confused in its sense of right and wrong. Many things which seemed abstractly right had become impossible to her; and some that were wrong were so natural, so necessary! She was unhappy in her home, and, with cruel mortification, she perceived that the other home, to which she had naturally looked forward, was receding into the distance. It was to be purchased only by despoiling the present. A certain impatience, almost by moments, ripening into disgust, sometimes moved her in respect to her betrothed. Her heart sickened sometimes at his suggestions—at the tone in which he spoke. He wanted all the rest of the world to bestir themselves on his behalf; but he himself had no idea of bestirring himself. He thought it natural that sacrifices of all sorts should be made to bring about his happiness—only not by him.

"But we are young," poor Nelly would say; "we can put up with anything. What does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal," Ernest would answer. "We are young; it is our time for enjoyment. They have had their day. You don't suppose our fathers and mothers feel half as keenly or enjoy half as much as we do? Then why shouldn't they give up, and let us have the means of enjoying? I don't understand that sort of dog-in-the-manger philosophy," said the young man, with a loftiness of moralizing which almost impressed Nelly, in spite of her higher perceptions.

She was seated in a low basket-work chair under the lime-trees, looking up with puckers of care upon her pretty forehead which had no business there, at the self-absorbed countenance of her lover. He was cutting down the young lime-shoots which grew up in a miniature forest round the trees, with a little cane in his hand. It was autumn, and the leaves fell at every stroke. He had one hand in his pocket, careless, yet disappointed; laying down the law, and feeling himself above its action. Nelly gazed at him with a mute inquiry—a close, anxious, silent investigation, which she could not

herself have explained. Yes; she was interrogating Nature and circumstances, and the present and the future; puzzled between her own instincts, her own ancient certainties of belief, and the philosophy of him who ought to be more to her than all else on earth. He was cleverer than she was, better able to express himself: was he more right than she? Or was he wrong, all wrong—wrong in feeling, in principle, in all that makes a man? What a question this was for a girl to ask herself! And she did not ask it; but only looked up at him, mutely wondering, trying to penetrate the real meaning that was in him—a meaning which must, she felt, be better and higher than anything he said.

Through the same old garden in which these two were seated another figure was visible, passing and repassing under the distant trees. This was Innocent, who had changed too, and developed in her way, during the interval which had been of so much importance to her. Her face had scarcely altered, for her mind was waking up but slowly, and it still retained the half vacant, half dreamy look habitual to it. But a change had come over her aspect generally. She had been assimilated in appearance, as much as circumstances permitted, to other girls of her age. Her hair had been put up, much against her will, though she had strenuously resisted all the modern mysteries of hair-dressing. In this point Alice had been invaluable to her; for Alice was old-fashioned, and looked with grim contempt at the devices, which even Nelly was not strong-minded enough to reject, for increasing the volume of piled-up hair with which the young ladies of the day disguise the shape and exaggerate the dimensions of their pretty heads. Alice drew Innocent's hair into a knot behind, loosely coiled and of no great magnitude. Even thus it was seldom "tidy," I am sorry to say, being somewhat short for such treatment, and often fell loose in a wandering, half curled lock upon her shoulders. Her dress, too, was still simply made and free from furbelows; but it was kept within a respectful distance of the fashion—enough "not to be remarked," which was Mrs. Eastwood's horror. Mrs. Eastwood, indeed, felt that Innocent was scarcely safe from that misery of being remarked; but consoled herself that, though the girl was nearly eighteen, she was scarcely, properly speaking, "out:" and in such cases, as everybody knows, plainness of dress is in the best taste and a mark of distinction. What was still more remarkable, however, was that Innocent held a book in her hand as she went up and down the Lady's Walk under the arching trees, which now and then sent down a leaf flickering through the softened daylight upon her, or upon the open page, an occurrence which sent her thoughts astray continually. The girl would look up with a vague soft smile on her face when this occurred, up and round as if half hoping to *see some con*cealed playmate among the branches or behind the *bole of a tree, and* then would breathe a gentle little sigh and return

to the book. Innocent was struggling with the difficulties of education at this moment. She was reading, or trying to read, history, endeavouring now and then, by help of her own voice, by whispering it half aloud, and thus cheating herself into attention, to master something about Elizabeth and the Marys, her of Smithfield and her of Scotland. She had undertaken this study by her own desire, curiously enough, having come to feel herself deficient. When a girl of nearly eighteen feels herself deficient in education, what can the most well-meaning of friends advise her to do? I need not say that Mrs. Eastwood's sense of propriety had long ere now secured a music master for Innocent, and that by this time she could play a little on the piano, not cleverly, but yet with a certain dreamy faculty, amusing herself with long-drawn chords and fragmentary combinations of her own. She could speak French and Italian, and even a little German, thanks to her foreign education, and she had no taste for drawing. What more than this could be done in the way of education for her? She had the same novels to read if she chose which came from Mudie's periodically for the rest of the family, and she was recommended to "take a book" by everybody who saw her seated, as she was seen so often, with her hands in her lap, doing nothing. But it was only within a very recent time that Innocent had begun to take this advice. She had been laughed at for her ignorance, and the laugh had touched her for the first time; and here she was accordingly, poor child, on this sunny, hazy autumn afternoon, straying up and down, up and down the Lady's Walk, reading half aloud to herself, about the dead controversies, the national struggles of which she knew nothing. The Queen of Scots even was to her but a printed name. She knew nothing of the story, nothing of the woman for whom partisans still fight, though she has been dead these two hundred years. She read over with her whispering lips the curt record of events which once made blood flow and hearts beat, insensible to them as though they had been mere revolutions of machinery. The leaf which dropped on her book was real, and so were the pebbles which caught her foot as she strayed on, not looking where she went; but the history was a dead thing so far as Innocent was concerned, and she herself was no more real than the history. What did she there, a stray, half-awakened soul, among the facts of that ordinary everyday scene? She was an embodied dream, scarcely realizable even by herself, and her occupation was as unreal as she was, as she strayed like a vision, appearing and re-appearing between the openings of the trees.

"Is it really true," said Molyneux, suddenly departing from the graver subject, "that old Longueville has fallen in love with that child, Innocent? It isn't forbidden, I believe, to marry your grandfather, but only your grandmother, eh Nelly? Are you jealous? First of all he wanted you——"

"He never wanted me."

"Oh, it is very well to say so now; but it was that, you know, that brought me to the point."

"If you did not want to be brought to the point, it is a pity that it should have happened through a mistake," said Nelly, driven into momentary crossness by the complication and confusion of her feelings. But Molyneux did not want to quarrel. He only laughed lightly.

"Perhaps I am the best judge whether it was a mistake," he said, "but in the meantime he is going in for Innocent. Is it true?"

"He has said something to mamma; but not enough to build any story upon, or to be talked about——"

"By George!" cried Molyneux, "it is about to come to a crisis before our eyes. There is your mother calling for Innocent, and I know Longueville's there——. Now this is what I call exciting. Innocent! Innocent! don't you hear your aunt calling you? She's got a new doll for you," he said, laughing, as the girl came slowly past them. "A good strong india-rubber affair, warranted not to break, that can walk and talk, and say——. She doesn't take any notice," he added with some disappointment. "What is she always dreaming about? She has got over all that nonsense about Frederick——"

"Please don't talk so lightly," said Nelly, still cross in spite of herself. "There never was any nonsense about Frederick. She liked him best, for she knew him first. She has never taken to us very much. I don't know whether it is our fault or her fault; but there was nothing like what you say."

Molyneux laughed again. "It does not matter," he said, "though you are very contradictory, Nelly. Of course you *are* jealous, that's what it is. Lady Longueville, with a handsome house in town, and half-a-dozen in the country, with diamonds and an opera-box, and everything that's heavenly. Confess now you do feel it. All this going to your little cousin!"

Nelly's eyes flashed. Few people see the joke of which they are themselves the subject, and Nelly was not superior to the rest of the world; but she had learned the wisdom of restraining her first outburst of feeling. She rose from her seat under the tree, and, going a little apart from him, watched Innocent making her way slowly through the gleams of sunshine and bars of shadow to the drawing-room windows, which were open. When the girl went slowly in through the open window, Nelly breathed forth a little sigh. "Poor child!" she said. She was thinking more of her own strange position than of anything that could come to her cousin. How little she had foreseen the perplexities, the chill doubts, the weakening of faith, the diminution of feeling, the irritation and weariness which often filled her now! Innocent could have no *such* experience; she was not capable of it; but the one girl threw *herself into the* position of the other, with a liveliness of feeling

which the circumstances scarcely called for. She forgot that Sir Alexis was as unlikely to inspire love as Innocent was to feel it. "I wonder what she will say?" Nelly murmured, with her eyes fixed on the window by which Innocent had disappeared.

"Say? nothing! there is one advantage of taciturnity. She will let it all be settled for her. A lucky girl, indeed; your mother must have played her cards very well," said Molyneux, with real approbation, "after you and I foiled her, Nelly, by our precipitation, to catch the great prize for her niece. You look angry. I think it was extremely clever of her, for my part."

"Ernest," said Nelly quickly, "I wish you would go. If you don't, I feel sure we shall quarrel, and I would rather not quarrel," cried the girl, with tears in her eyes. "Please go away."

"Why, Nelly? you are out of temper——"

"I am out of everything," she cried, "out of heart, out of hope, out of——"

"Not out of love?" he said, drawing her hand through his arm. He, at least, was not out of love. And Nelly cried, but let him soothe her. Was not she his, bound to him for ever and ever? Was it not hers to forgive, to tolerate, to endure all things? If he seemed to think amiss would not that mend? All this went through Nelly's heart as her brief hot passion of tears relieved the irritation in her soul; but still the irritation was there.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PROPOSAL.

INNOCENT walked in unsuspectingly through the great open window in the drawing-room, which looked dusky and dim after the sunshine. The flowers peeped through the glass doors of the conservatory, and her own image in the great glass over the mantelpiece seemed to confront her as she came in. Mrs. Eastwood rose from the sofa, close to the window, where she had been sitting beside Sir Alexis. She took Innocent's hand. The other hand still embraced the history book, which she was holding close to her breast. Mrs. Eastwood looked into the girl's face tenderly, with an anxious gaze, to which Innocent gave no response. "I wonder if she will understand?" she said, turning to Longueville, who had risen from the sofa. "I think I can make her understand," he said. And then Mrs. Eastwood put her arm round the girl and kissed her. Innocent had ceased to be surprised and impatient of the kindness by which she was surrounded. Though she still took

little part in the life of the family, it began to seem natural to her that people should feel, and that they should talk, and laugh, and cry, and conduct themselves as it once seemed so strange for them to do. She was not surprised now at any "fuss" that was made. She accepted it quietly, taking little part in it. But for the moment this scene did indeed appear like a dream; the unexpected kiss, the words to which she attached no definite meaning, the something evidently connected with herself, which they settled before her eyes; even the air of the room seemed full of a certain whispering curiosity, interest, and suspense. Innocent felt that something was about to happen, without knowing how. Was she to be sent away? Had something occurred that involved her fate? She looked, no longer quite passive, with a little tremulous wonder and doubt from one to the other. Then Mrs. Eastwood, who had been holding her hand, kissed her again, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Sir Alexis has something to say to you, Innocent. Give him your attention," said Mrs. Eastwood, "and when you want me, you will find me in the dining-room. My poor dear child—God bless you!" cried the kind woman, and hurried away as if afraid to commit herself. Then it was the turn of Sir Alexis to advance, which he did, looking, as Innocent thought, strangely at her, as if he had something terrible to communicate. He, too, took her hand, and led her to the sofa, to the place from which Mrs. Eastwood had risen. "Innocent," he said softly.

She looked at him with scared and anxious eyes. She was not as she had been. Had she been asked whether she loved her relations, she would probably have stared at the questioner, and made no reply; but the thought of leaving them—of going out into the strange world—struck her with a sharp pang. "Am I to be sent away?" she cried; "is that what you have to tell me?" and a dull dread, which she could not struggle against, took possession of Innocent's soul.

"To be sent away! No, that is the last thing I could have to tell you," he said, looking at her with something in his eyes which surprised her, which confused her; which, in her simplicity, she could not understand, yet felt moved by strangely. Her foolish terror died away. The faint vague smile, with which she had looked round at the falling leaves, came upon her face again. This smile was quite peculiar to Innocent. It moved some people almost to tears; and it frightened others. It was like the look of some one smiling in a dream. The smile altogether overpowered the old veteran and man of the world beside her. There was something in it half-imbecile, half-divine; and, indeed, Innocent stood at the very climax of these two extremes—almost a fool, almost the purest visionary development of womankind. In her present stage of being it seemed impossible to predict on which side the balance would drop.

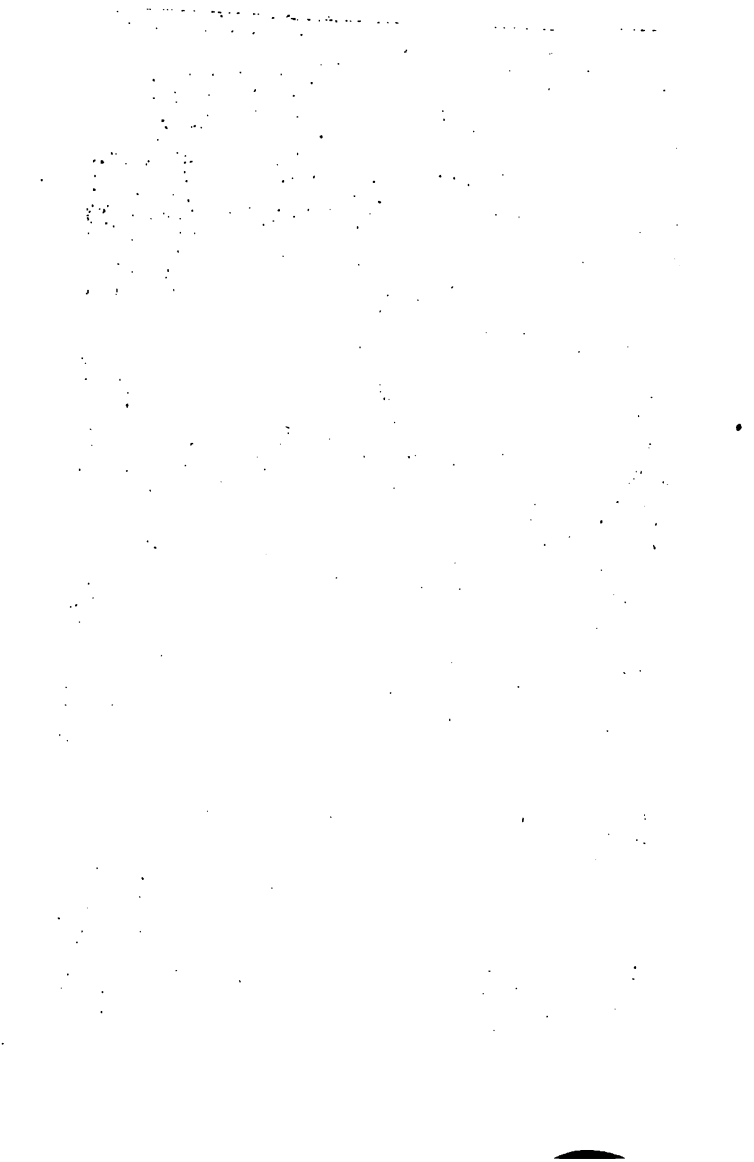
"*Innocent,*" he said very softly, and then made a pause; "I am







Innocent is introduced to Sir Alexis.



as old as your father," he added after a moment, in which he seemed to take breath.

"Yes."

"As old as your father; and you are but a child—not a grown woman. Young in years, younger in mind——"

"You say that because I am not clever," said Innocent, with a look of pain.

"No, indeed. I do not want you to be clever—not anything but what you are——"

The girl looked up at him again with that soft, vague smile. She made a movement as if to place her hand in his—then checked herself, having learned that such ways of testifying her pleasure were not generally approved of. Sir Alexis had been very kind to her. He had petted her as a man of mature age is permitted to pet a child, bringing her flowers and fruit and pretty things, and asking no comprehension, no reply, except the smile. She felt at her ease with him. It did not even occur to her to inquire what he could want now. And it is impossible to describe the bewildering effect which this had upon the mind of the man who wanted to present himself to Innocent as her lover. He was struck dumb. He looked at her with a wondering gaze—baffled, silenced, in all his superior sense and knowledge. But he had brought her here for the purpose of making this disclosure of his wishes; he had been left with her under this special understanding, and he felt that only ridicule could be his fate if his courage failed him. To be daunted by Innocent! The thought was too absurd. And yet when he looked at her he felt daunted still.

"Innocent," he said, "I have a great deal to say to you; but you are so—young, that it is difficult to say it. You were afraid just now of being sent away. Did it ever occur to you that you might some time go away of your own will?"

"I go away? Where should I go?" said Innocent. "I should have liked to have stayed at Pisa; but now I know better—I have nothing, no money, no home. I could not go away. And, besides, I do not wish it. It is best here."

"You are fond of them, then, now?"

Innocent made a little pause, looking at him as if to fathom his meaning before she said simply, "Yes;" and Sir Alexis, with all his experience, grew red under the girl's look; but in reality she had no thought of fathoming what he meant. She never asked herself whether he meant anything; she paused only to collect her wandering intelligence. Was she fond of them? She had scarcely asked herself the question—her feelings towards them had been passive more than active—"Yes,"—no more than that; no girlish enthusiasm or effusiveness was possible to her.

"And Ellinor is fond of her mother—fonder than you can be; but yet some day soon she will go away——"

"Nelly?—ah, that will be when she is married," said Innocent, with a livelier tone.

"And you, too, will be married some time."

"Shall I?" she said with a smile. "No, I do not think so—Why? Some people are never married; and some——" here she stopped short, and a sombre look came over her face. Sir Alexis, following her eyes, imagined that they rested on a portrait of Frederick, and the thought gave him a pang.

"Some would have been better if they had not married," he said. "Innocent, what should you think of marrying me——?"

"You!" She looked somewhat amused, undisturbed, at him, making him feel more disconcerted, more baffled than ever.

"I am serious," he said, almost with impatience, taking her hand and pressing it somewhat tightly to keep her attention alive—"I want you to think of what I say. You are dependent here, dependent upon your aunt, who some time or other may feel you a burden; and I could make you rich, and put everything at your feet. You, who are a poor girl, would become a great lady if you married me, Innocent. You would find it pleasant in many ways. You should do what you like, and have what you like, without asking any one's leave. Yes, and go anywhere—to Pisa if you pleased. I would do whatever you wished, and spend my life in trying to please you—for I am very fond of you, Innocent," said the man of the world in a tone of appeal which was almost a whimper.

What a curious scene it was: she so passive, so unexcited, not understanding nor caring to understand; and he, the wise man, agitated, perplexed, anxious. He had meant that this should be a very different scene. He had meant to put forth his hand and take her to himself, as he might have taken a flower; but this no longer seemed so easy as he looked upon the blankness of her beautiful, wistful, unresponsive face.

"Have you no answer to give me?" he said, almost humbly, holding her slender hand between his.

"I don't think I understand," said Innocent slowly. "I am—stupid, as the servants say. Nelly would go, perhaps, if you were to ask her."

"But it is you I want—you, Innocent! Try to understand—I want you to marry me—to be my wife."

"Like Frederick and—his wife?" asked Innocent, with a shudder.

"Pshaw—like any man and his wife," he said. "Innocent, you are not so foolish as you try to make people think. You must be able to understand this. Do you like me? Tell me that first."

"Yes," she said calmly, looking at him, grave, and curious, and unabashed.

"Then will you marry me? Tell me yes or no."

"*Please,* no!" said Innocent, with a troubled look. "Please, *no*——"

Sir Alexis dropped the hand he had been holding, and got up and walked about the room. To tell the truth, he was impatient, half angry, annoyed rather than wounded, as men generally are who are refused. Even in the midst of his annoyance he was half inclined to laugh. He had made up his mind to marry her whether she chose or not; but to be refused point-blank by this child was a thing which had scarcely appeared to him possible. It irritated, and vexed, and half-amused him, without in the least altering his purpose and determination. A comical half-wish to have her whipped mingled in his mind with vexation at having made so little impression upon her. After a few moments, during which he calmed himself down by his promenade, he came back and took his seat again, and her hand, which she gave to him smiling. She was glad he was not angry. It was a relief to her mind to find that he did not "scold" her, as so many people felt themselves at liberty to do.

"Innocent, my dear," he said, "I want you to think over this carefully. Should not you like to go into the world with me, to see everything that is to be seen; to go everywhere, and buy what you liked, and live where you pleased? I would do anything to please you. I would go with you everywhere to take care of you. Before you say no, think what it is you are refusing; and speak to your aunt, and let her advise you. She knows better than you do. I know better than you do," he said, with a smile which indeed was a smile at himself, so odd and strange was his position. "I advise you to accept me, Innocent. Longueville is a beautiful place, much finer than anything you have seen in England; and we could go to Pisa if you liked."

"Ah, I should have liked it once—a year ago," said Innocent; "but now it is best here. I don't want to go away——"

"Not to make me happy? Suppose you take that into consideration? to make a man who is fond of you happy."

She gazed at him with wondering eyes. She did not understand the language even which he was speaking. Had it been warm, youthful love, probably Innocent would have known what he meant. But this middle-aged fondness for the beautiful strange young creature, so strangely young, so unusual in her type of beauty, conveyed no idea to the mind which was but half alive. I don't think she believed this last speech; it seemed to her, though she had a very limited perception of humour, that it must be a joke.

"Innocent," he cried, growing excited, and raising his voice, as if she had been deaf; "is it possible you do not understand me? I love you—is not that plain? I want to have you always with me, to have you for my wife. I want you to marry me. All girls marry; it is natural—it is necessary; and you say you like me. Shall I call your aunt, and tell her you have consented, and will be my wife?"

"Oh, please no! please no!" cried Innocent, putting her hand on his arm in sudden fright. "If she said so, I would have to do it. Do not make me go away. I am not—clever. Don't be angry or scold me. I am beginning to know a little better." She put her hands together instinctively like a child. "It would be as dark again as when I came here; do not make me go away!"

"Nobody will make you do anything; but I love you, Innocent. Come with me of your own will. Nobody will make you go away."

"Ah, thanks!" she cried, with a long-drawn sigh of relief. She did not seem to notice his other words—only the last, which relieved her. She put her clasped hands to her side, and looked at him with her dreamy smile. "I was frightened for a moment," she said, "but I knew you were too kind. Feel how it made my heart beat. You are not angry? It was wrong not to care when I came here; but it cannot be wrong to wish to stay now? I could not bear to go away."

"You will think differently after a while," he said, "and then——" The man was piqued by her perfect insensibility to the honour he had done her. But before he uttered the threat which came to his lips, better feelings came over him. "Yes, Innocent," he said, "I made a mistake; I have been premature. But now listen to me. If ever you change your mind—if ever you wish to go away—if the time should come when you may be glad to think you have another home ready for you, and some one who loves you—then will you think of me? I will not be angry if you will promise this."

"Oh, yes," she cried gladly. "Yes, I will promise. I will think of you; I will run to you. It is not likely," she added, half to herself, "that they will send me away, or that I shall wish to go; but if——"

"In that case you will come to me?"

"Yes, directly. I will remember. I promise—faithfully, faithfully!" The vague look brightened up into warmer intelligence as she held out her hand to him. I am not sure that the intelligence suited the face so well as its usual passive visionariness. This gleam of light made her more like a child than she had ever been before. Sir Alexis rose gravely, and, stooping over her, kissed her forehead. She shrank a hair's breadth; but yet received the salute gravely too, without a blush, looking at him with a wondering endeavour to investigate his countenance. He could not be angry since he gave her this sign of amity. As for the discomfited lover himself, he took his hat, and went away very gravely, disappointed it is true, but touched and rendered serious, he could not quite tell how. He did not feel like a man who had been refused, but rather like one who had rashly thrust the vulgar questions of life into some mysterious *intermediate region* between earth and heaven. He had spoken *earthly language to a* creature, half idiot, half angel, whose spotless

mind had no thoughts or impulses in it which could make it possible for her to understand him. He was half ashamed of himself, half solemnized as by a vision. As this impression wore off, however, which it did in time, Sir Alexis was not discouraged. He could not have her now; but one day he would have her, and his love was not of the hotly passionate kind which cannot wait. Perhaps, indeed, he wanted Innocent only as he would have wanted a lovely picture, a rare flower. He had never seen any one the least like her, and he did not require a helpmate or a companion; it was a supreme luxury, the rarest he could think of, that he wanted. And with such sentiments a man, especially when he is fifty, may be content to wait.

When Mrs. Eastwood heard the door close she came back anxiously to the drawing-room. Things had gone badly for Sir Alexis, she felt sure, from the mere fact that he had gone away. Innocent was about to step out again through the open window when her aunt came up to her. She laid her hand upon the girl's shoulder, detaining her. Innocent had still her history-book clasped in one hand against her breast.

"Where is Sir Alexis?" said Mrs. Eastwood. "Have you sent him away?"

"Oh, no," said Innocent, the gleam of intelligence which I have already described still brightening about her face, and changing for the moment into a kind of clever imbecility the usual pensive dreaminess of its expression. "He went away himself quite of his own will. And he was not angry. We are friends as much as ever."

"Then you refused him, Innocent?'

"I don't know what you mean by 'refused.' I asked him not to ask you to make me go away. I don't want to go away. Did you wish me to go?" the girl asked, with the old wistful look coming back into her face. It was the first time this thought had struck her, and a chill stole into her heart.

"No," said Mrs. Eastwood, drawing her close. "I am glad you are not going, Innocent. Only it might have been better for you, my poor child. He is rich, and he is fond of you. He would have been very kind; he would have given you every advantage, more than I can give you. And if anything was to happen to me—— But you don't understand such calculations. It would have been a comfort to have you settled," said Mrs. Eastwood with a sigh.

"Is Nelly settled?" asked Innocent.

"God knows!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, in sudden trouble; and then she turned to the girl whom she had adopted with an instinctive appeal for sympathy. "If I was to die who would think of you who would care for you—Nelly and you? There would be no one but Frederick—and Frederick's wife."

Innocent did not make any reply—a faint colour flickered over her cheek. She turned away from her aunt, twisting her fingers together with a helpless gesture. Then she said, very low, "Frederick—would always take care—of me."

"Oh, my dear," cried Mrs. Eastwood, "you must not think of Frederick. I am afraid when he is kind to you he is thinking more of himself than you. That is one reason why I should have been glad, very glad. Frederick belongs to his wife."

"May I go now, and read my history?" said Innocent, after a pause. She went back to the path overshadowed with trees, and opened her book; and whispered to herself again, half aloud, how Mary plotted and wove her spells, how Elizabeth lay in wait for her like a spider. She resumed at the same sentence as if nothing had happened. How much of it went into her mind? How much of the other had gone into her mind? Sir Alexis, Frederick, all the surrounding figures, were they ghostly and dim to her as Mary of Scotland and the great Elizabeth? But no one could answer this question. Amid the strange light-gleams and weird darkness of her own little world she dwelt alone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MRS. FREDERICK.

THE evening of the day on which the above incidents occurred was that of a periodical banquet, feared and staved off as long as possible by all the Eastwoods. Since the time of Frederick's marriage it had been considered necessary that he and his wife should be invited to dinner formally from time to time, in order that it might be visible to the world and "Mrs. Frederick's family" that full honour was done to her. Nelly and Mrs. Eastwood had made a great effort to adopt Amanda, if not into their hearts, at least into their society, after the terrible event was actually accomplished which made her their daughter and sister. But I need not say that this was a very hopeless attempt, and that as familiar companionship gradually failed between people who resembled each other so little, the periodical dinner gradually gained importance as the only practicable way of keeping up "a proper intercourse." Mrs. Frederick had come to London with very great ideas. She had hoped for nothing less than an entry into the fashionable world, and all the *glory* of associating with lords and ladies. The visits she received *from the ladies of* Mrs. Eastwood's circle disgusted and disappointed

her. What! Marry and come to London for no better purpose than to be visited by ladies from the suburbs, who lived there always—ladies with no better title than Mrs.; some of them, like Mrs. Eastwood herself, paying their visits in flys, or in the plainest of little broughams, no better than a fly. Visions of splendid vehicles, with embroidered hammercloths and celestial flunkeys, had entranced Amanda's imagination. The Eastwoods were county people at Sterborne—they were a baronet's family—magnates in the neighbourhood; and the beauty had no means of realizing that a country baronet is no great personage in London, much less a country baronet's cousin. The disappointment was bitter, and she was not the woman to conceal it. Gradually, however, she fell into a kind of society, or to use her own words, formed a circle, which pleased her well enough. This consisted chiefly of the men who had been her father's visitors in former days, several of whom had handles to their names. They were not as a general rule much credit to know, but they suited Amanda better than the Mrs. Everards, and other humdrum persons, who had welcomed her first to her new position. When she had yawned through one or two dinner parties, painfully got up for Mrs. Eastwood's sake, to make the best of a bad business, by the society which frequented The Elms, Amanda had declared her determination to have nothing more to do with "Frederick's old-fashioned set." They were not much in sympathy with her, to tell the truth; and dinners at Richmond, with Lord Hunterston and his kind in attendance, were a great deal more to her liking. Amanda held, in fact, the opinion which poor little Innocent had expressed innocently as a reflection of the sentiments of her father. She disliked women. They were all jealous of her beauty, she believed; they were her critics or her rivals—never her friends; spite was their chief characteristic; envy their main sentiment. The men of Amanda's set were of her opinion—so are a great many clever persons, it must be allowed—at least, in books. Therefore it is not to be supposed that Amanda looked forward with more distinct gratification than that felt by the ladies at The Elms to her periodical dinner. She put on her handsomest dresses and her finest talk to dazzle them, and she made it a subject for her peculiar wit for some time before and after.

"I am going to dine with my old mother-in-law," she would say to the young men, few in number at this season of the year, who filled her little drawing-room in the afternoon. "Such a set of old guys she has about her, to be sure. Why she should insist upon having me, I can't imagine, for she hates me, of course. But duty before everything. I shall have to go."

"Why should you have to go?" said one. "And by Jove, I'll come to-morrow to hear all about it!" said another. The lively sympathy of this chorus did Mrs. Frederick good.

"Oh, you shall hear the whole account," she said. "It's like

Noah's Ark. There is the regular clergyman, and some old fogies of lawyers, and a horrible man called John Vane——"

"Oh, come, Mrs. Eastwood, John Vane's no end of a good fellow. I know him as well as I know myself," said one of the interlocutors.

"That may be—but he ain't a good fellow at The Elms. The Elms! only fancy. Doesn't it sound like Hampstead Heath? He is related to the mad girl I told you of—and he's after my prim little puss of a sister-in-law, in a quiet way; for she is engaged, if you please, and oh! does give herself such airs on the strength of it. But the women! You should see the women! In old silks and satins that belonged to their grandmothers, with turbans and I don't know what—all looking as if they could eat me."

"That, of course," said one of Amanda's court, with a laugh.

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Frederick, giggling slightly in response; "and to hear them lay down the law! what one should do, and what one should not do. And, then, mamma-in-law herself! But there are some things too dreadful to be talked about. Mothers-in-law are one of these things. Tell me about Hurlingham, or something pleasant. If I go on thinking of what's before me, I shall die."

Thus it will be seen the dispositions of Mrs. Frederick were little likely to promote harmony. On the other hand, Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly had their private conference, which was not much more hopeful.

"Try to avoid unpleasant subjects," said Mrs. Eastwood. "Talk of Brighton, and that sort of thing, Nelly. Or stay, as they have been abroad for their holiday, get her to talk about Switzerland. That must be a safe subject. She will think it is fine to talk about Switzerland, as she was never there before; and keep her off her grievances, if possible. Frederick looks so black when she begins; poor Frederick, how he is changed!"

Nelly made no response on this point, for she was not so deeply convinced as was her mother that Frederick had been a great deal "nicer" before he was married. This is, I am sorry to say, a very common opinion among a man's female relations. But Nelly had not been so much deluded about the "niceness" of her brother in his previous state as many sisters happily are. She maintained a prudent silence so far as Frederick was concerned.

"If I try to keep her off her grievances, you must try to keep her off Innocent, mamma," said Nelly; and this was the bargain with which they concluded. I am not sure that Mrs. Eastwood was quite right in her selection of guests to meet Mrs. Frederick. Had she invited Sir Alexis, that imposing person might have kept her in order; but what did Amanda care for Sir Timothy Doul, who had been Governor of Barbadoes, or for Mr. Parchemin, though he was a great lawyer?—any more than she would have done for great poets and such people, in distinction to the really great, the dukes *and countesses for* whom her soul longed. Sir Timothy and Lady

Doul were the only strangers present on this occasion, for, as the reader is aware, Mr. Parchemin was one of Mrs. Eastwood's councillors. Ernest Molyneux had failed at the last moment, and had been hurriedly replaced by Mr. Vane, who was always ready to do a kind action, and who of late had been a great deal about The Elms. Molyneux objected much to meet Mrs. Frederick. Vane objected to nothing. Perhaps the difference lay in the fact that one of the men had attained all he wanted, and was no longer anxious about Nelly's favour, but considered it her duty to please him; whereas the other, foreseeing the possibility of a catastrophe, felt himself (though despairingly) on his promotion, and deemed it wise to be on the spot, in order that if anything offered he might have full advantage of the chance. This, I fear, was Mr. Vane's reason for keeping so much in the foreground. It is impossible to describe the use he was at The Elms. He was never out of temper, and Ernest was very often out of temper. He was satisfied with all the arrangements made by the ladies, and Ernest found fault continually. Nelly, with a guilty sense of treachery in her mind, had felt herself turn to the man who was "a connexion" for rest and sympathy, when she could not turn to her lover. This was a very terrible state of affairs, but no one was quite conscious how far it had gone.

Mrs. Frederick made her appearance in a dress of pink silk, with a train almost a yard long. Her beautiful shoulders were bare, and her arms. Her hair was dressed in the most elaborate way which an excited hairdresser could devise; a soft little curling fringe of it half covered her low but white forehead, and great golden billows rose above, increasing at once her height and the size of her head. All the glow of colour, all the roundness of outline, all the flush of physical beauty which had maddened Frederick, remained undimmed and undiminished; but Frederick stalked in behind her like a black shadow, gloomy, disappointed, dismal, more like Charles I. than ever. Wherever he went, all the ladies were sorry for Frederick. Poor fellow, he had made a mistake in his marriage, and how he felt it! He writhed when his Amanda began to talk fine, and to display her knowledge of great people. He looked at her morosely whenever she opened her lips, and followed her into the room with a gloom upon his countenance which here he did not think it necessary to conceal. His mother at least had forgiven all the faults that Frederick had ever committed against her, in consideration of his present sufferings. The fact that he was discontented with the toy for which he had paid so dear (and for which, alas! Mrs. Eastwood, too, was paying dear), seemed to cover all his previous sins. Had he put a better face upon it, and endured cheerfully the doom which he had brought upon himself, his mother, and womankind in general, would have thought less well of him; they would have concluded that he was happy, and would have despised him; but they were sorry for him now, and elevated him to the rank of a martyr, in con-

sideration of his gloom and disgust. Nelly was almost the only rebel against this universal tenderness.

"He married to please himself," said Nelly; "he ought to make the best of it now, and not the worst. It is mean of him to pose in this gloomy way. I should like to shake him," cried the impetuous girl.

"Nelly, don't be so hard-hearted," her mother would say, with piteous looks.

Thus Frederick was generally successful in his gloom—at least among the feminine half of society. He came in behind Amanda's train, which he looked at with disgust, as it curled about his foot. Nevertheless he was pleased to see that his gorgeous wife made an impression on the old fogies who sat by his mother's side—Sir Timothy and Lady Doul.

"I am pretty well, thank you," said Amanda, "as well as it is possible to be in London at this time of the year; when all one's friends are gone, and when the place is full of outlandish country-looking people, or strange fishes from abroad, it is such a bore to stay in London. You don't feel it out here in the suburbs—you have your little society of your own, which pays no attention to the season. I am sure I wish I was as well off."

"Dear me!" said old Lady Doul, with the admiration and wonder of ignorance. "I think London is always so exciting. I could not bear too much of it. Sir Timothy and I were just saying what a racket it was. To be sure we are living in Half-Moon Street, in the centre of everything," the old lady added with simple pride. Her cap had been made in Barbadoes, and so had her gown; she had not been "in town" for more than twenty years.

Amanda gave her a stare in passing. She was never civil to women.

"I should think you would find the desert lively if you think Half-Moon Street exciting," she said. "Give me a nice country house choke full of people, with luncheons at the cover-side, and dances in the evening, and all sorts of fun going on. But when one marries a poor clerk in a public office, one has to put up with many things," she went on, turning to old Sir Timothy, who, startled and embarrassed, did not know what to reply.

"Oh, ah, oh, of course," said the old man; "very good—very good. Everybody suffers from a penurious government. I assure you, my dear young lady, the fine young fellows one meets out in the world—*attachés*, and such like—wasting their time, as I always tell them, upon twopence-halfpenny a year. Why, I had a secretary once, a young man of excellent family——"

"But I hope you did not allow him to marry," said Amanda. "It is always upon the wives that the hardship falls. If you saw the *little* hole of a place we have to live in—and back to London in *October—only fancy!* I wonder what we are supposed to be made

of. The men are much better off with their clubs, and that sort of thing. They know at least all that is going on; they hear the gossip, and see every stray creature there is to see; but as for us, poor ladies——"

"Tell me how far you went in Switzerland, Amanda," said Nelly. "You must have enjoyed that. We have only been once among the mountains; but what a pleasure it was!—did you go to——? But I remember Frederick wrote you had changed your minds——"

Nelly spoke with the artificiality of a made-up digression, and Sir Timothy thought her but a poor little shadowy thing by the side of her beautiful sister-in-law.

"Oh, I never go into raptures I don't feel," said Amanda. "I don't care twopence for Switzerland; I hate mountains; I would rather go to Margate any day—that is, if nothing better were to be had," she added, remembering that Margate was hardly consistent with the splendour of her pretensions—"Don't ask me about places, as if I was a guide book. I like people, and talk, and to see new faces, and the play, and all that's going on."

"Very pleasant," said Sir Timothy, "and very good taste, and I quite agree with you. I have promised Lady Doul and myself the pleasure of the play to-morrow."

"The play—to-morrow!" cried Amanda, putting out her hand with an air of horror—"The play! At this time of the year? You must be out of your senses——"

Here Brownlow made his appearance at the door, and the party went in to dinner.

"You did not tell us that Mrs. Frederick was a beauty," said Sir Timothy in Mrs. Eastwood's ear, "and so completely one of the *beau monde*. You said *Mrs.* Frederick surely? Not a title? Ah, now you set my mind at rest. I was rather afraid to hazard a name. Allow me to congratulate you on such a charming daughter-in-law."

"Yes—she is very handsome," said poor Mrs. Eastwood.

"Handsome! a divinity, my dear madam, quite a divinity!" cried the old man. For half the dinner through Mrs. Eastwood was silent, wondering whether her old acquaintance had become imbecile in the climate of Barbadoes; or if he was venturing to joke at Mrs. Frederick's expense. It was difficult to solve this question, for old Sir Timothy set up a lively flirtation with the beauty, who was placed at her mother-in-law's other hand. All through the course of dinner, during which banquet Mrs. Eastwood lost much of her accustomed good-humoured ease, the old man went on. Was he drawing out Amanda's folly? or was he dazzled by her beauty with the usual incomprehensible weakness of men? Mr. Vane, who sat between Mrs. Eastwood and Amanda, added this to his many attractions, that he was not dazzled by her; and he, too, was somewhat silent, finding little to say in the crossfire which the others kept up. As for Frederick, he sat gloomy and grand at the foot of

the table between Lady Doul and his sister, and was not conversational. Lady Doul had a pleasant little chattering tongue, and told him she remembered him as a baby, and congratulated him on his beautiful wife.

"Mrs. Frederick seems to have been a great deal in society," the old lady said, with a keen glance at him, which belied the simplicity of her question. And Frederick, with the consciousness of Nelly's eye upon him, did not know how to respond.

"Oh, ah," he said, giving a tacit assent, and wondering all the time what she was really thinking, and why that muff, Molyneux, was not there. If it was a mere quarrel between Nelly and her lover, or even if Molyneux had declared off, Frederick would not have disturbed himself much on the subject; but he could not but recollect that Molyneux had been absent the last time he and his wife had dined at The Elms. If he were to behave badly to Nelly it would be bad, no doubt; but to give himself airs with Frederick was a still more dreadful offence. "Confound his impudence," he muttered between his teeth.

As for the other members of the party, Innocent was very passive, and Mr. Parchemin, with his spectacles pushed back upon his forehead, ate his dinner with serious devotion, and troubled himself about nothing which might be going on.

After dinner, the ladies, being so few in number, made a little group in the drawing-room round Mrs. Eastwood's chair. It was then that Innocent attracted Amanda's attention.

"What a great girl she is growing—almost grown up," she said. "What do you intend to do with her?"

Innocent was leaning against the back of Mrs. Eastwood's chair. Her attention was directed quite otherwise, or rather, she was attending to nothing, gazing across the room vacantly with her eyes fixed on the door. Whether this was mere chance, or whether it was the lingering remains of the old adoration for Frederick, Nelly, who was watching her very closely, could not tell. The girl was not attending—but she woke up and stirred slightly at this allusion to herself.

"What am I going to do with her?" asked Mrs. Eastwood in dismay.

"Yes—I mean, do you intend to send her out as a governess, or anything of that sort?" said Amanda, plucking a flower to pieces which she had taken from the dinner table. It was bad enough to abstract the flower from a bouquet which Nelly had arranged very carefully; but, having abstracted it, to pull it to pieces, throwing the petals on the floor, was almost more than human patience, personified in Nelly Eastwood, could bear.

"Now she has grown up," continued the beauty, "I suppose you mean her to be of some use. You can't keep her always in idleness to the injury of your own children——"

"*We must not* talk about the questions you don't fully understand,"

cried Mrs. Eastwood, with flushed cheeks. "Innocent, my love, go and fetch a cushion for Lady Doul. And perhaps Mrs. Frederick will give us a little music, Nelly, if you have anything new to tempt her."

"Oh, I never play till the gentlemen come in," said Amanda; "but I don't see why you should take me up so sharp about Innocent. Now you've given her her education she ought to be made to do something. I'll look out for a companion's place, if you like, among my friends. Why shouldn't I understand? it's easy enough; and I am sure all your children have a right to interfere. Why should a girl that is only your half-niece take the bread out of their mouths? Ask any one if I am not right. Every penny you spend on her will be so much less for your own."

"We need not trouble Lady Doul with our family concerns," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a tremendous effort to keep her temper; and she addressed a question to the old lady, upon which Amanda again broke in.

"Oh, I assure you Frederick and I often talk it over; he thinks as I do. If she couldn't be a governess she might be a companion. It would be quite easy; I, myself——"

"Come and look at something I have got here," cried Nelly, at the table, sending meaning looks at her mother.

"Leave me alone, Nelly, I think it's my duty to speak. As the wife of the eldest son I have a right to interfere; the Eastwoods are not so rich that the little they have should be spent on strangers."

"My dear Mrs. Frederick," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a forced smile, while old Lady Doul hurried to the other end of the room to speak to Nelly; "I have been used to manage my own affairs without reference either to my sons or my son's wife."

"And so much the worse for you," cried Amanda, with flushed cheeks. "What can you know about business?—women never do—you ought to take sensible advice; you ought to consider your own children, and not a lot of hangers-on; you ought not just to take your own way, without ever thinking of us, starving our children for a pack of poor relations. Oh, I know what I am saying, and I ain't to be put down by looks. I'm one of the family; and a poor enough thing for me, too, with my looks and my expectations; but to see a great beggar girl eating all up with her useless ways—what ought to come to us and our children. I cannot put up with it. I *will* say what I've got to say."

"What is the matter, Amanda?" said Frederick, behind her. He had heard the raised tone of his wife's voice, and had rushed in, in dismay. He found his mother risen from her chair, indignant, and burning with suppressed anger, and his wife standing before her, aiding her words by gestures, her white arm raised, her cheeks deeply flushed, her breath coming quick, and her eyes flashing red fire. He put his hand on her arm. "Come and sit down here on

the sofa; the other men are just coming in. For heaven's sake, Amanda, compose yourself! Do you want to be ill again? do you want to make a scene?"

"I don't care twopence for making a scene. I want to have it out now it's been started," cried Amanda. "I say that great girl oughtn't to be kept up in idleness and luxury. She ought to be sent out into the world to make her living. Ain't we the natural heirs, and haven't we a right to speak? Oh, what do I care for the men coming in? let 'em come in. It's only right and justice; since you haven't the heart to speak up, I must. Innocent, indeed! a nice sort of Innocent, to eat up what ought to be for us. There isn't so much of it; and a pack of younger brothers already, and that sort. Oh, I have no patience; let me have it out."

"For God's sake, Amanda——"

She made an ineffectual attempt to go on, but breath failed her, and she allowed herself to be drawn to the sofa, and laid herself back upon the pillows panting, her white shoulders and forehead stained with patches of vivid pink. "It's all very well to say 'don't excite yourself,'" she said. "How can I help it, when people are so self-willed and stupid!"

The unhappy Frederick sat down by her and endeavoured to soothe her. Surely a little recompense for his many offences was doled out to him that evening; he talked to her in a low tone, expostulating, entreating. "Think of your health," was the burden of his argument. He fanned her, he held her hand, he wiped her hot forehead with her laced handkerchief. Poor Frederick! He had pleased himself, and he was paying the penalty. Nelly and Lady Doul had rushed with a common impulse towards the door to meet the other gentlemen, and stood there involuntarily pointing out old pictures to their admiration, and plunging into depths of conversation which bewildered the new-comers. Mrs. Eastwood, too angry to think for the moment of keeping up appearances, had pushed back her chair as far as it would go, and after sitting down in it a minute, had risen again to look for Innocent, who stood with one hand upon the table, gazing with wide-open eyes at Frederick and his wife. No sort of offence was upon Innocent's dreamy face. Awakened attention, a slight startled wonder, but nothing painful was in her expression, and perhaps that wonder was more roused by the sight of Amanda's excitement and exhaustion than by anything she had said. Mrs. Eastwood hastened to her, took the girl into her arms, and held her close. "My poor child, my dear child. You must not mind her, Innocent," she said.

"Is she ill?" asked Innocent, wondering.

"I am sure I wish she was!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, "she deserves to be, venturing to dictate to me, the little vulgar intruder, a girl not *fit to be in the same* room with Nelly and you!"

"*Little!*" *said* Innocent, with an amused smile. "She is not

little. She is the biggest of all. Are you very angry? Did she scold you?"

"I am very angry; but don't you mind, my dear. Never think again of what she said, Innocent. She is a passionate, selfish fool; don't pay any attention to what she said."

"No," said docile Innocent; "but I should like to be of use—it would be pleasant to be of use," she added, after a pause. "Let me do something. What is a companion? How strange that she should be so red and so breathless? Is it all about me?"

"It is because she is a fool," said Mrs. Eastwood, though, indeed, she herself was flushed and excited too.

"But what is a companion?" asked Innocent.

"You are my companion and Nelly's," said Mrs. Eastwood; "my dear, don't think of it any more."

"And she is Frederick's," said Innocent, contemplating with a strange abstract spectatorship the group on the sofa. There was no enmity, only a wondering contemplation in her eyes. "Can he never be without her? Will she stay with him for ever and ever?"

"As long as she lives," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a profound sigh.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NEW COMPLICATION.

THIS evening was an eventful evening at The Elms. When Mrs. Frederick had rested sufficiently and calmed down, she was carried off by her husband with the very briefest and driest of leave-takings. Old Sir Timothy and his wife had gone off before, as hurriedly as was consistent with good-breeding, shaking their old heads over the family fray they had witnessed, and forming suppositions as to the origin of Mrs. Frederick which did her injustice, unexalted though her antecedents were.

"I don't know what Mrs. Eastwood could mean by asking me to meet such a person," cried Lady Doul in high dudgeon.

"Hush! my dear, hush! the poor woman was trying to make the best of it," said Sir Timothy; "and though she's evidently a termagant, she's extraordinarily pretty, wonderfully pretty."

"I have no patience with you men," said Lady Doul. "Pretty! what has pretty to do with it? Do you think a pretty face is like charity, and covers a multitude of sins?"

"A great many, my dear," said old Sir Timothy, with a chuckle

And so the old pair jogged on to their lodgings, half sorry, half shocked, half indignant. The party they left behind was more seriously excited. The first thing Mrs. Eastwood did was to hurry off Innocent to bed, accompanying her to her room with a fear for the effect of Amanda's ravings upon her feelings, which was really uncalled for; for Innocent's feelings were too little on the surface to be moved by any such assault. It had given rise to vague thoughts in her mind, but no wound—thoughts which, when her aunt, with many caresses, had left her, she expressed to old Alice, with more freedom than probably she would have ventured upon with any one else. Innocent's habitation was now in the old school-room, to which she had taken so great a fancy. And here Alice waited upon her with a care which amazed the other servants, for Innocent had nothing to give in return, not even thanks or caresses, and was considered "proud" and "stuck-up" in her dreamy habitual silence.

"She said I might be a companion," said Innocent. "And Sir Alexis said something too—a companion! I am Nelly's companion and my aunt's, she says—Frederick's wife meant something different. Alice, you are old; you know a great many things——"

"I know you're but an innocent, my poor bonnie bairn," said the old woman with a sigh.

"Of course I am Innocent; but that is only my name. Companion is not a name; it is a thing. She is Frederick's companion. My aunt says he will never be rid of her—never—so long as she lives. What a pity that she cannot be made to stop living! She scolds—like—like—she grows red like the women we once saw quarrelling in the street."

"When you stoppit to tell them it was ugly," said Alice; "and why should they scold each other?"

"Yes," said Innocent, "to scold children is natural, I suppose, at least, everybody does it, even you, Alice; but Frederick's wife—and he cannot send her away. I wish she might die, and then Frederick would be free."

"Bairn, bairn, hold your tongue!" cried Alice. "Are you no aware that it's a sin, a great sin, to wish anybody dead? Never let me hear you say such a thing again."

"But I do think it," said Innocent; "she makes herself ill; she suffers; she makes everybody else unhappy. She scolds, it does not matter whom. Why should people go on living when they do so much harm?"

"But you would not do her harm?" said Alice, curiously gazing at her; "and why should Mr. Frederick be free? He has taken his *own way*, and he must put up with it. He has made his bed, and *he must lie on it.* What is he, that he should be delivered from *what he has brought* on himself?"



"I know you're but an innocent, my poor bonnie bairn."



"I am fond of Frederick," said Innocent dreamily. "If he is good or not I do not know, but I am fond of him. Alice, do you know I have found out something? When papa said women were hateful, he meant women like Frederick's wife."

"My bonnie lamb," said Alice, "think as little as you can either of Mr. Frederick or Mr. Frederick's wife. Such kind of thoughts are little good. Say your prayers, and mind that you must wish harm to no person. It's against a' Scripture; though, eh! human nature's weak, and if it was me I doubt if I could keep my hands off her," she added to herself.

When Mrs. Eastwood left the room with Innocent, Mr. Vane asked permission to stay. "May I wait till you come back?" he asked, "I have something to say." Perhaps it was injudicious on all sides, for, indeed, Nelly, who was thus left alone with him in a state of high and indignant resentment, was, perhaps, too much disposed to confide in the sympathetic companion who was always ready to feel with her, always willing to be interested. They were standing together over the little fire, which on this mild October evening smouldered unnecessarily in the grate. But when there is any trouble in a house the fire becomes at once the centre; everybody goes to it mechanically. Nelly stood there, clasping her hands together by way of restraining herself; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes abashed. She was not only wounded and angry, but ashamed to the bottom of her heart. She had been doing all she could to conceal and cover over the "scene" which, like all Englishwomen, she dreaded to have known. But she had not been successful, and now her mind was so full of it, so running over with indignation and excitement, that she knew she ought not to have trusted herself with any companion; and yet absolute self-denial was so hard. She could not be so wise as to go away and bury the tumult of feeling which was eager to be expressed.

"Oh, Mr. Vane, what must you think of us?" she burst forth at last.

"What must I think of you? I am afraid some things I dare not tell you," he said. "But what can any one think—that you have had to submit to a very ordinary form of domestic misfortune, and that, by dint of doing your very best to bear it, you have to suffer much that is disagreeable? That is all that the most curious could think. Every one who is worthy to be called your friend, Miss Eastwood, should be only too glad to stand by you in such a trial."

I don't know what John Vane meant, or if he fully realized what he was saying; but as for Nelly she turned crimson, and gave him a quick, furtive look of inquiry. Had he looked as if he meant anything she would have been offended; but he was sufficiently innocent or clever to dismiss all meaning from his face.

"Oh, as for that," said Nelly, "it would be foolish to speak as if we wanted any one to stand by us. Mamma and I are able to sup-

port each other—mamma, and I, and Innocent. We are quite a strong body; we want no one else," said Nelly. She looked up at him, smiling, to prove her assertion, but somehow just at that moment a chance tear, which had gathered on her eyelashes without her knowledge, seized the opportunity to fall. "Why what is this? I wonder," she said, with a little laugh, wiping it from her hand with her handkerchief; "it seems I must have been crying without knowing it. How silly! It is horrid that because one happens to be a woman one should always make a fool of one's self and cry."

"I wish we were all fools of your description," said Vane.

"What, to cry? Oh no. It comes natural to a girl, but it is dreadful in a man. And there is not much to cry about either," said Nelly. "It is not Mrs. Frederick that makes me unhappy, Mr. Vane; it is that poor mamma must feel what I once said to you, that we are all trying to get as much out of her as ever we can. Why should she have given up her own comforts to let Frederick marry? If papa had been alive, no one would have expected him to do it; but because mamma is a woman, Frederick and everybody think she should give in continually. Do you think it is just or right? Why should she give up all she has been used to, to give us things we have no need of? First her carriage, and now her old servants; and she talks even of letting the dear old house. Mr. Vane, perhaps I ought not to talk like this to you—but do you think it is right? Should not a man try when he marries to make something for himself?"

"If I were ever so happy," said Vane, "that is what I should do. I should like my wife to feel that I was working for her. *My* wife! That sort of thing is not for me."

"Why shouldn't it be for you?" said Nelly in a softened tone; but she felt the ground was dangerous, and perhaps she felt that there was a certain inference in all that was being said—a something which implicated others as well as her brother; therefore she hasted to place Frederick in the foreground as the sole subject of discourse.

"Perhaps I am too angry with Frederick," she said; "it is because I feel as if mamma might think we were all alike—all thinking of what she has, not of her; all grasping and wanting something. Rather than she should think that of me I would die."

"She could not think that of you. It would be impossible," said Vane.

"I don't know," said Nelly, the tears gathering once more on her down-dropped eyelashes. "Oh, how true it is what mamma says—that nature wrongs women more than law does! Sometimes we are compelled to look different from what we are that people may not see or find out—other things. Sometimes we *have to put on* false looks to make other people seem true.

You men, you don't know half nor a quarter what poor girls have to do!"

This curious and enigmatical outburst filled Vane with feelings which I will not attempt to describe. He thought he understood it, and his whole heart melted over the girl, whose case already, perhaps, he had thought over too much. He put his hand for a moment on hers, not holding it, but giving just one touch of a sympathy which went beyond words. As he did so another tear, slowly brimming over, fell on his hand. Instantly, before he knew, the water stood in his own eyes; Nelly startled, dashed the tear off with her handkerchief, and crying hastily, "Oh, I beg your pardon! I beg your pardon!" covered her hot eyes and flushed face with her hand.

It was at this moment that Molyneux came in. I do not wonder for my part that he was a little startled by the position of the two, and the attitude of affairs generally; Nelly crying, and Vane beside her with an agitated look about the eyes, which tells much that men would prefer to conceal. "Hullo, what is wrong?" he said, striding up to her side. Nelly recovered her composure instantaneously; and Vane, drawing back, felt that the charm of the moment was over, and all its magic flown.

"What is the matter?" cried Molyneux, more angry than affectionate; "crying? What are you crying for? Has Winks been taken bad, or have you lost your canary bird, or what? I think you might have kept your tears till I came."

"They are not pleasant things to keep," said Nelly, "and indeed I was not crying. Mrs. Frederick put us all out of temper——"

"Oh, Mrs. Frederick! Dick told me there had been a shindy," said the young man. "I'm sorry I was not here to see the fun. Vane, you are luckier than I am—you are always on the spot."

A retort was on John Vane's lips; but he considered all the circumstances, and held his peace, offering no explanations. Nelly's betrothed looked from one to the other with, I do not deny, a certain justification for his suspicions. "Well," he said, "now that I am here you don't seem communicative. What was it all about?"

"Oh, the subject does not matter," cried Nelly. "It was an attack upon mamma. Don't let us speak of it; it makes me wicked, it makes my heart sick. Poor mamma, who has always been so good to us—is this how we are to repay her at the end?"

"I can't say, of course, if you don't choose to tell me," said Molyneux; "but Mrs. Eastwood is not any worse off than other people of her age, so far as I can see. We can't all be romantic little gooses, Nelly, like you."

"Don't!" said Nelly, with sharp pain and shame. Why was it that her lover's familiar tone went so near to disgust her at such a moment? She drew away, not venturing to look up, ashamed,

because the other was present, she would have said. And this was true; but not entirely in the simple sense of the words.

"I must speak to your mother about Innocent," Vane said, apologetically, feeling too that he was in the way, and they stood all there about the fire in the most awkward of positions until Mrs. Eastwood, with her clouded brow, came back. She gave Ernest a little nod of recognition—no more. It was well that he had not been there, and yet it was ill that he took no pains to stand by Nelly in any emergency. She seated herself in her usual chair, taking little notice of any one. Her pulses were still tingling, and her heart beating. She was a proud woman, though she made but small external pretensions; and she had been insulted in her own house.

"I want you to let Innocent go to my sister," said Vane, approaching her softly, "for a week or two perhaps. Don't you think she should make acquaintance with her father's relations? She is grown up; she has developed so much under your kind care. Could you not trust her, even for a few weeks, out of your own hands?"

"Oh, Mr. Vane!" cried Mrs. Eastwood hastily, with tears coming to her eyes; "this is because of what you have just been hearing—because of what my daughter-in-law was so wicked and so cruel as to say."

"What is the matter?" said Molyneux to Nelly. "What *did* she say? and what has he to do with it? and what does your mother mean by looking so excited? It all seems a pretty muddle for a man to fall into."

"What she said was about Innocent," said Nelly, restraining herself with an effort; "that we ought not to keep her here—that she should be sent out as a governess—I don't know how much more hard-hearted nonsense. I can't tell how she dared to speak so to mamma."

"That woman would dare anything," said Molyneux. "About Innocent? Well, I don't know that she was very wrong; that girl will turn into a dreadful burden one day or other if she is not made to marry somebody. I can't think what your mother meant, when she had such a chance, by letting Longueville slip through her fingers. So that's why *he's* here, I suppose? I hate that man, John Vane; always poking himself where he is not wanted."

"I suppose mamma must have wanted him or she would not have asked him," said Nelly. "We could not have an empty place at table."

"Oh, that's why you are cross, is it?" said Ernest, with a vain laugh; "but, Nelly, you must not really expect that I can always be doing duty at those family parties. A family party is the thing I most hate in the world."

"Fortunately for mamma, Mr. Vane is not of your opinion," said Nelly. It was the first time she had attempted anything like self-assertion. She had never stood at bay before.

CHAPTER XXIX.

INNOCENT'S OUTSET IN THE WORLD.

In consequence of this interview between Mrs. Eastwood and John Vane it was arranged that Innocent should pay Miss Vane a visit at the High Lodge, near Sterborne, where that lady lived in an eccentric way of her own in an old house which her brother had abandoned to her, and which she had turned to a great many uses quite uncontemplated by her predecessors. "We are an eccentric race," her brother had said, laughing; "but as it is my way to be good for nothing, so it is Lætitia's way to be good for a great deal. The one of us neutralizes the other. I tell her she is trying to lay up a stock of superfluous merit on my account, one good result of having a brother a ne'er-do-well——"

"Why should you call yourself a ne'er-do-well!" said Mrs. Eastwood. Nelly had already asked the same question furtively with a glance, and there was a warmth in the little outburst of partisanship by which these two women defended him against himself which warmed the man's heart.

"Because, alas! it is true," he said; "you got this character of me before you knew me? Ah, I was sure you had! and you see it is realized; but Lætitia is good for us both. Some part of her goodness is after a droll fashion, I confess. She is prodigiously High Church; she keeps a poor little parson in petticoats and a cloak, whom she calls father, and treats, I fear, as she treats her housemaids; but mind, she is very good both to the housemaids and the parson. I think Father Featherstone is a mistake; but if there ever was a good woman bent on doing good and succeeding in the attempt, it is my sister Lætitia. She will be very good to Innocent. You need not fear to trust her in my sister's hands."

"I like men who believe in their sisters," said Mrs. Eastwood with a smile.

And Nelly looked at him. She did not say anything, but her lips moved as if she would have echoed her mother's words. Nelly's face had grown somehow longer, with a wistful expression which, by moments, was almost like Innocent's. Especially when she looked at John Vane was this the case; a perpetual comparison seemed to be going on in her mind, almost a complaint against him that he was different from the other who was so much more important to her. Why should Vane always be of use and service when that other neglected his duties? Why should he be, as Ernest said, always on the spot when the other was away? Nelly was half angry with the man who was so ready to stand by her; and then there came over her heart the softest compunction and self-reproach, mingled—in that inextricable

complication which belongs to all human feeling—with bitterness and mortification. Was it possible that she grudged the kindness of the one because it threw into further relief the indifference of the other? This, as the reader will easily see, was a very unsafe, as well as a very uncomfortable, state of mind for an engaged young woman. Perhaps on the whole, the kindest thing John Vane could have done would have been to take himself out of the way, and leave Ernest to show himself in the best light possible, a thing which his constant presence put out of the question.

To return, however, to the conversation with which this chapter begins. It took place on the morning after Mrs. Frederick's outburst, and was the end of the adjourned discussion which Vane had begun on the previous evening. He had found some trouble in soothing Mrs. Eastwood, and persuading her that his proposal had nothing to do with what Amanda had said, but had been in his mind for some time previously. When he succeeded in this, everything was easy enough. It was certainly well that Innocent should be made acquainted with her family, her father's relations. "If anything were to happen to me," Mrs. Eastwood allowed with some pathos, "it would be an excellent thing that she should have other friends to fall back upon. Frederick could not, I fear, give her a home, as I might have hoped, and as for Nelly, I don't know how Nelly may be situated," the mother said, looking at her daughter. She did not know what was in Nelly's mind; but that Ernest should be ready to give succour and shelter to a penniless dependent was a thing which, at this stage of affairs, with her present knowledge of Ernest, Mrs. Eastwood could not hope.

"It was with no such lugubrious idea that I made my proposal," said John Vane, laughing. "But Innocent is nearly eighteen, and there could not be an easier plunge into life for her than a few weeks at the High Lodge. My sister has made half a convent, half a school, of the old house. I wish you would come too, and see what she is doing. But if not, I will take my little cousin down and leave her with Lætitia. It will teach Innocent the use of some new faculties. You have taught her only how to be carried about and cared for and tended——"

"I have not spoiled her, I hope," said Mrs. Eastwood, who was not, however, displeased with the compliment. When a woman comes to that stage of life in which all that she does and says is no longer admirable, because she says and does it—when she begins to feel the force of hot and hostile criticism and to be shaken even in the natural confidence with which she has been accustomed to regard her own motives, then praise becomes very sweet to her; it restores her to the moral standing-ground which she seemed to have lost. Mrs. Eastwood had just accepted with a natural pleasure John Vane's testimony to her goodness, when Frederick came in suddenly, with a harassed look upon his face. Frederick

had been in the country shooting, as he said—for some time—without his wife; and had come back looking pale, as he used to look after his absences in the old days.

"Something is wrong?" said his mother, divining what his looks meant as Vane discreetly withdrew.

"Oh, nothing particular—nothing out of the ordinary," he said; "I wonder though, that, knowing all the circumstances as you do, you should not make an effort, mother, to prevent Amanda from exciting herself. Of course, she is ill to-day. I told you before I married what was the state of affairs; *she* may deserve it if you please, but I don't deserve it, and the worst always falls on me. I do think you and Nelly between you might at least manage to keep the peace."

"Frederick! you seem quite unaware of how it all happened," cried his mother, suddenly roused to a movement of self-defence.

"I know how it all turned out," said Frederick, "and I do think my mother, if she had any regard for me, would try to avoid such scenes. She has been ill all night; and now she's taken it into her head to go down to Sterborne, to the old place—the last thing in the world I could wish for. If you only knew," said Frederick in a tone of the deepest injury, "how I hate her father; how I have struggled to keep them apart! And now here is my wife—your daughter-in-law—going down to our own county among all the Eastwoods, to Batty's house! By Jove, it will break my heart."

Words of unkind meaning were on Nelly's very lips. "You should not have married Batty's daughter, if you hate him," was what she was disposed to say. "Frederick would not have spared me had I done anything of the kind," she added to herself. She was guilty in intention of this unkind utterance; but in act she was innocent; she bit her lips, and kept it in. Mrs. Eastwood was a great deal more sympathetic.

"But if you were to speak to her, Frederick—if you were to say you did not like it?" she suggested anxiously.

"Speak! say! much she would care," cried Frederick. "It just shows how little you know Amanda. That confounded heart disease of hers—if she has a heart disease—makes her believe that she is free to insult everybody. She must not be crossed herself; but there is nothing she likes so much as to cross others. No, I shall have to give in. I shall have to take her there, though I hate the whole concern. I do not think there ever was a more miserable wretch than I am on the face of the earth," cried Frederick, flinging himself wearily into a chair.

"My poor boy!" said his mother, going to him, and passing her soft kind hand over his forehead, raising the waves of his hair, which were not in their usual good order. Frederick was not generally very tolerant of his mother's caresses, but of late he had been soothed by them. Amanda cared very little for his amour

propre, and made no particular effort to magnify his importance, and a man likes to feel himself important, if only to his mother. On the other hand, his mother was half-pleased even in the midst of her pity for him that he should, as it were, throw aside his wife, and recognize himself as a victim. It is not a fine quality, this, in women; but I am afraid a great many good women are conscious of possessing it. When a man has connected himself with his inferior, with some one we disapprove of, we like him to find out his mistake. We feel that it is better for him to know that he has done badly, very badly, for himself; and though in higher minds a certain contempt for the being who thus gives up the cause of his once-beloved, mingles with the softer feeling, yet we are all more or less mollified towards the son or brother who has made a foolish marriage, when he delivers over his wife, metaphorically, to our tender mercies, and abandons her standard. I don't know whether the same sentiment exists on the other side, but I avow its existence on my own side. Mrs. Eastwood was pleased that her boy gave his Amanda up. She was far more tenderly sorry for him than had he been still in love. In words, she tried "to make the best of her," and recognized fully that now the deed was done it was to be desired that Frederick should be "happy" with the woman who was his wife; but she thought more highly of him because he was not happy. She was more pleased, more tender, much more softened towards her son than if his household had been a pleasant one. Nelly did not share these sentiments. She was impatient with Frederick, and disposed to despise him for giving up Amanda's cause. She put herself in Amanda's place, small as was her sympathy for that young woman, and involuntarily conjured up before her a picture of the Molyneuxes, who would feel towards Ernest's wife much as the Eastwoods felt to Frederick's. Would Ernest abandon her, Nelly, to their strictures? would he allow them to suppose that he too had made a mistake? This thought made Nelly's cheeks burn, and her eyes glow, and disposed her on the spot to assault Frederick, and lift up Amanda's falling standard.

"It is curious," said Mrs. Eastwood, after a pause, "that we should be so much entangled with Sterborne, where all the Eastwoods live, without having anything to do with the Eastwoods. Perhaps Innocent might travel with you, Frederick, if you are obliged to go. She has been invited to the High Lodge, to make acquaintance with her father's family."

"Who lives at the High Lodge?"

"Mr. Vane's sister, the only one of the Vanes who has taken much notice of Innocent."

"What does John Vane want with Innocent?" said Frederick, his tone changing. He got up from his chair, and slightly pushed *away his mother*, who was still leaning over him. "Does he want *to marry her too?*"

"Does Mr. Vane want to marry some one else—too?" said Nelly instinctively, with an impulse for which next moment she was sorry.

"You should know best," said Frederick; and then he turned to his mother with that air of superior knowledge and virtue which he knew so well how to assume. "I told you when that man first came to the house that his character was very doubtful. He has always been a queer fellow. Had I thought that you would receive him almost into the family, and make so much of him, I should never have allowed him to come here at all."

"But, Frederick!—I have never seen anything in him that was not nice," said Mrs. Eastwood, alarmed.

"Oh, I daresay, mother. A man does not come into a lady's drawing-room to show off his shady qualities; but I warned you to start with. There are many queer stories about him current among men. Ask Molyneux—I don't think there is any love lost between him and John Vane.

"Is that the case, Nelly?" asked Mrs. Eastwood.

Nelly felt to her dismay that a hot and angry blush—a blush not altogether of embarrassment, of something that felt like passion—covered her face. "I should be sorry to quote Ernest on any such subject," she said, faltering yet eager. "He told me that there were stories current among men about Sir Alexis, that he was not a man to be brought into your house, into my company——"

("What impertinence! one of my oldest friends!") said Mrs. Eastwood, in a parenthesis.

"And then," continued Nelly, "he turned round upon me, and laughed at my knowing such things, when I told you, mamma. He made me out to be a gossip, to be fond of disagreeable reports; he made me feel as if I had made it up; that is how men show their friendship for each other. Probably both Frederick and he would do the same about Mr. Vane."

"Molyneux would be flattered by your opinion of him," said Frederick, laughing; and had it not been for the lucky arrival of Dick and Jenny, I do not know how far the quarrel might have gone. Mrs. Eastwood, however, would not have "the boys" made parties to any discussion of this kind, and Frederick departed after a time to his office, where he was so very hard worked, poor fellow, and where he appeared between twelve and one o'clock, having settled his domestic affairs first, as became a Briton of the most "domesticated" race in the world.

During the interval which has passed without record in these pages, Dick, the much suffering and much labouring, had encountered a great event, and had got through it, I do not say triumphantly, but at least successfully. The examination—the great exam., *which had* exercised his mind and temper for years—had

come and passed; and Dick had pulled through. There he was, still walking about with books in his pocket, still in the trammels of "a coach," and still subject to other terrible and ghastly episodes of exam., which had (I think) to be repeated for two or three years before the full-blown competition wallah was sent to India. I do not remember to have encountered in society many young men of this tremendously educated class, and therefore I cannot tell if Dick may be considered as a fair specimen; but this I can say, that considering the amount of information which must have been crammed into his head, it was astonishing how lightly he wore it. He was profoundly careful not to shock and humiliate the uninstructed mass of his fellow-creatures by letting it appear when there was no occasion for such vanities; and, in short, Dick examined and passed, was as much like Dick unexamined and dubious as could be supposed. Jenny had undergone a greater change. He had left Eton and had matriculated at Balliol, and felt himself a greater man than it is given to mortal in any other stage of existence to feel himself. He had done even more than this; he had gained a scholarship, and was thus actually paying part of his own expenses, a fact which his mother could not sufficiently admire and wonder at, and which still had all the freshness of a family joke in the house. It was astonishing how the brows of the two women cleared, how the atmosphere lightened when these two boys (oh, boys, I beg your pardon—men) came in. No complication had yet arisen in their young lives. Jenny had hung his mother's photograph over the mantelpiece in his college sitting-room, and boasted that she had as much sense as all the dons put together, though she knew no Greek. I wonder whether in the progress of the human intellect this kind of boy will long survive; but the very sight of Jenny's face (though he was not handsome), and Dick's big figure, with a book in its coat pocket, was good for sore hearts as well as eyes.

"We were talking about Mr. Vane," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a little furtive artfulness such as women use. She would not enter into any discussion of him with her boys, nor direct their attention to the stories "current among men." She reverenced their youth more perhaps than, had she been anything but an ignorant woman, she would have thought it necessary to reverence it. Probably they both knew a great deal more than she did in that kind—or so at least all men inform women for their comfort; but still I think it was good for Dick and Jenny that their mother ignored all these "stories current," &c. "We were talking," she said, "about Mr. Vane. Frederick does not seem quite to like him——"

"I should think not. He isn't the sort of fellow for Frederick to like," said Dick. "He is not your superior sort of prig. *He is jolly to* everybody. *I* like him—gives himself no airs, *and is never above* saying he's wrong when he's wrong. Why

just the other day—I told you, Jen—about the build of that yacht——"

"I like him," said Jenny, but I'm not a fair judge. He came down to Eton last fourth of June, and didn't he just give me a tip! so I can't speak; I'm bribed; but if I knew anything *he* wanted——"

"So that is your opinion," said the mother, well pleased. "They say though," she added mournfully, "that those men in the clubs——"

"I don't belong to any club," said Dick. "It's very hard. What does it matter, if I *am* going to India? I shall come back from India, I hope. I suppose you all wish to see me again? Well, then, why shouldn't I be proposed for Trevor's club? It doesn't bind a fellow to anything, and it's a handy place to have people call upon you, and to send your letters. Trevor offered to put me up a year ago. His father is on the committee, and I know two or three other fellows there."

"My dear boy, Frederick thought it a waste of money—as you are going away," said Mrs. Eastwood, with an incipient tear in her eye. This glimmer of moisture was always produced by any reference to the fact that Dick was going away.

"Then thanks to him," said Dick, in high dudgeon, "I can't tell any one what is said in the clubs."

"What is the question?" said Jenny, always practical; "is John Vane on his trial for something?" And here the boy, without knowing it, glanced at Nelly; and Nelly turned abruptly away, and went out through the conservatory into the garden, with a very great tumult and many painful thoughts in her breast.

"Innocent is going to pay his sister a visit," said Mrs. Eastwood, "at a house near Sterborne. He thinks it is time she knew her father's relations, and I have consented, for I thought so too. But Frederick says——"

"Is she going now, or at Christmas?" said Jenny. "If now, I give my consent, for I'm going off to-morrow. I like Innocent to be at home when I am at home. You may laugh, if you please, but I like it; why shouldn't I?" said the boy hotly. And I like Nelly to be at home. What is the good of girls if they don't make the old place look nice? But she may go now, if you please, what has that to do with John Vane?"

Upon this Dick laughed long and low, "John ain't in love with Innocent," he said chuckling. "I say, mother, what a set of jolly spoons!—if you know what that means. I'll take her down to the country, if you like, and see John Vane's sister. Perhaps she might take a fancy to me."

"Silly boy, she is as old as I am," said his mother, with a smile. And thus the discussions of the morning fell into cheerful

home banter, and the jests of the boys. This consoled the mother, the light of whose firmament was at present supplied by these two boys; but it did not comfort Nelly, who was wading up to her neck in personal dismay and trouble; and it would have called forth nothing but angry contempt from Frederick, who felt his own griefs big enough to eclipse both earth and heaven.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE HIGH LODGE.

THUS every one discussed and gave their opinion as to Innocent's outset in life—except Innocent herself. She acquiesced—it was all she ever did. A slight paling of her very faint colour, a certain look of fright in her eyes were the only indications that it affected her at all. Somehow this change in her life associated itself in her ideas with Amanda's proposal to render her of use—a proposal which she had received with more favour than any one else in the house; it had offended them all on her account, but it had not offended Innocent. She listened to all the descriptions which were given her of Miss Vane, her unknown relation, and of the pretty country which she was about to visit, and of the novelty and change which her aunt thought would do her so much good, with passive incomprehension. Novelty alarmed, it did not excite her; she wanted no change—but yet she was quite contented to be sent where they pleased; to do whatever they thought proper. She looked upon her visit as a very devout and enthusiastic believer looks—or is supposed to look—upon death; as an unknown and terrible event of which she could form no idea, but which would be soon over, and which it was absolutely the will of those who were as gods to Innocent that she should undergo "for her good." Thus she allowed herself to be prepared for it with a mixture of fright and docility; everybody talked of it except herself, the heroine. Innocent's visit was in every mouth except Innocent's. She did not even form to herself any picture of what it would be like, as Nelly kept doing perpetually. She had no faculty for making pictures. Indeed, the peculiarity of Innocent's organization began to centre chiefly in this point—that she had no imagination. It did not seem a moral want in her as it does in some people, so much *as a wistful vacancy*, a blank caused by some accident. No sort of *cynic scorn of the* imagination of others, such as the unimaginative

often show, was in her passive soul; but she followed the gaze of the eyes which could thus see into the unseen with a wistful look which was full of pathos.

"How do you know when things are going to happen?" she said to Nelly, who had just been indulging in a long account of Miss Vane's probable appearance and manners to cheer them over their work, as they sat with Alice in Mrs. Eastwood's room, helping to make some new "things" for Innocent's outfit.

"I don't know in the least—I only imagine." said Nelly, laughing.

"Imagine!" repeated Innocent. She did not understand it. She was all a dream, poor child, and Nelly was all real; but the dream-girl possessed no imagination at all, while the other was running over with ready youthful fancy. No matter-of-fact creature, no dull clodhopper, could be more absolutely and rigidly bound within the lines of what she knew, than Innocent. She knew the old wandering life in Italy, and she knew The Elms. But all the rest of the world was a blank to her. She had formed no idea either of what she was about to meet with, or how she was to conduct herself under other circumstances. With such an absence of the faculty which guides us through it, the future and every change can be nothing but a terror to the ignorant soul.

"Look here, Innocent," said Jenny, who had always taken a special charge of her, on the evening before she left home. He had taken her into the garden for the purpose of examining her, and satisfying himself that she was what he called a free agent. "Are you sure you like going? That's what I want to know."

"Like going?" said Innocent, opening her eyes. "Oh, no."

"Why are you going, then? Is it because you are obliged?" asked Jenny, knitting portentous brows.

"Obliged!" Innocent repeated once more, with a little wonder. "I am going because my aunt thinks so—neither because I am obliged, nor because I like. It is not me, it is her."

"But it ought not to be like that," cried Jenny. "Speak to my mother, she is very reasonable. She never forces a fellow into anything; tell her that you would rather not. That's how I always did."

"But you are a boy," said Innocent, with a mixture of respect and gentle contempt, which I fear she had learned from Nelly.

"What difference does that make? have a little courage, and tell me. The thing you want to learn," said Jenny, with much gravity, "is that everybody here wishes you to be happy, wishes you to do what pleases you. Don't misunderstand my mother. You take up an idea of your own—you don't look at the real state of the

case, and try to make out what she means. Don't you understand me, Innocent?"

"No," said Innocent, looking at him with veiled and wondering eyes.

Poor Jenny! he thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, and muttered something to himself, which was not adapted for publication; and then he looked at her in his turn with that anxious but impotent gaze with which so often one mortal attempts to fathom another—to fathom the unfathomable—whether there be nothing or much in those veiled and inscrutable depths of personal identity. She smiled at him softly, and the dreamy light of this smile went over all her face, touching it into visionary life and beauty. Jenny was baffled in his inquiry, in his investigation, in his counsel; he could not make anything of Innocent. With a mixture of kindness and impatience he hurried her back into the house.

"It is growing cold, and you have no shawl," said Jenny. Would poor Innocent never be sensible to any higher solicitude than this?

Next day she went away under the care of John Vane. She did not cry or show any emotion; but her eyes were full of fright, and the excitement of terror. She had not even the same unreasoning instinctive confidence to support her which she had felt in Frederick on her former journey. John Vane was very kind to her, and very good, she knew; but he was not Frederick. She sat still as a mouse in her corner of the carriage, and said "Yes" and "No" when he asked her a question, and saw the world whirl round her once again, and the long stretches of country, and strange faces look in. To Innocent it seemed a kind of treadmill, turning round and round. She was not conscious of making any progress; but only of unknown faces that looked at her, of long green lines of fields and hedgerows flying past. When they had got half way through their journey, they discovered that Frederick was in the same train, with his wife, whom he was taking to her father's house. He came to the carriage, when the train stopped, and leaned his arms upon the window and talked to Innocent, who brightened at the sight of him, and instinctively put out her hand to cling to the most real thing she knew, the first human creature whom she had personally identified and discovered, as it were, out of the unknown. John Vane could not be supposed to understand this altogether inexplainable feeling, which poor Innocent could no more have put into words than she could have written a poem. He thought very differently of it. He thought like a man that the other man, smiling and talking lightly to the poor girl, had meanly accepted the worthless flower of this child's love to laugh at, or tread under foot. He was unjust, for perhaps the most really good feeling in Frederick's mind (when she did not cross or irritate him) was his *tenderness for* his little cousin; but the other cousin, who felt himself her protector, realized this as little as he understood the nature

of Innocent's sentiments. He made the poor child change her seat to the other end of the carriage, and when Frederick came back, entertained him with remarks upon the weather, to which Frederick responded in the same tone. There was, as people say, no love lost between them.

"Oh, is it Innocent?" said Amanda, when they reached Sterborne. "So your mother has taken my advice, Fred. I suppose she is going to be trained for a governess at Miss Vane's school? Quite right, quite right! You may come and see me, Innocent, if you like; it will be a little change for you. After all the petting you have had at The Elms, you may not quite like it at first; but it's for your good. Fred, is there a carriage for me? Is papa there? Come and take me out, then; don't leave me here like a piece of luggage. Come and see me soon, Innocent. You will always be some one to talk to—Good-bye."

"Innocent," said John Vane, when he had placed her in the light open carriage which had been sent for them from the High Lodge, "I do not wish you to go and see that woman; neither does your aunt, I think. So unless you wish it very much——"

"I don't wish it at all," said Innocent, more distinctly than usual; and with a promptitude which surprised her companion.

"Then you don't like her?" he said.

"She took Frederick away from us," said Innocent; "he would have lived at home always but for her. She makes my aunt, and every one, unhappy. Him, too—sometimes he looks as if he were miserable. People who make everybody miserable," the girl continued, very gravely, "ought not to be allowed to live."

"My dear child," he said, half laughing, "that is a terrible doctrine. In that way none of us would be safe."

"You don't make any one miserable," said Innocent. "Few that I have ever seen do. But she does. And Frederick——"

"I don't wish to say anything to you against your cousin," said Vane, very gravely; "but Innocent, you must not think too highly of Frederick Eastwood. He is not so perfect as you suppose. Remember that it is entirely his own fault that he has such a wife; you must not make a hero of Frederick. The less you see of him, also, the better for your own sake——"

Innocent looked at him wonderingly with vague consternation. Did she understand what he said? Certainly not the inference conveyed in his words—the more serious meaning. But she had no time to reply, for the short drive was over, and the High Lodge in sight. It was a curious old straggling house, with an old chapel standing detached, but connected by a covered way with the house. The grounds were large and well kept, and the quaint little lattice windows showed their several clusters of faces peeping out. The door stood open, flooded with evening sunshine. Great feathery branches of the clematis which had done flowering, and was now all

cottony with seed pods, hung about the porch. The wall was one mass of creeping plants; late roses were flaunting out of reach high up about the clustered chimneys and gables; and the flower borders about the house were bright with asters and scarlet geraniums, and all kinds of autumn flowers. The chapel bell began to tinkle as they drove in at the gate, and from all the corners of the irregular old house appeared groups of women and children. Even Innocent was roused into curiosity by the strange sight. In the slanting afternoon light, with that background of old wall, matted all over with interlacing wreaths of jessamine, clematis, honeysuckle, and roses, and pierced with twinkling casements, each looking out as with so many eyes through the little diamond panes—the sight was a very pretty one. One or two women in the dress of Sisters lent an additional quaintness to the picture; the children were of various ages and of various dress, fluttering like flowers along the trim and well-kept walk. John Vane laughed as men laugh who are half-amused, half-affected by the scene before them.

"Now we shall see Letty in all her glory," he said.

This sight, which was so unusual and so little expected, had actually driven from Innocent's mind for the moment all recollection of herself, and all thoughts of the meeting with another stranger which was about to follow. She woke up with a start to find herself lifted out of the carriage, and taken suddenly with a rapid salute nto some one's arms. The new figure was that of a little woman with very bright eyes, and a very alert and lively aspect, who kissed Innocent in a business-like manner, and then turning, raised her cheek to her brother, who was about three times as tall as she was.

"So here you are," said Miss Vane, "fifteen minutes late, as that train always is. Quick, come in, Reginald, there is tea in the parlour. I have only time to say a word to you before chapel. This way, my dear, follow me; the passage is rather narrow, and there are two steps, just at the most unlikely places—but you will get used to it in time."

Thus talking she led them in to a large low room, with great beams across the roof, and a multiplicity of small windows, deeply recessed in the thick old wall. There was a great open fire-place, with a few logs of wood burning on the hearth, and a little white-covered table with tea, standing before it; this table, and the easy chair, and a number of books, were the only modern things in the room. It was panelled with dark oak, and had, consequently, nothing of the brightness of the modern English rooms which Innocent new; neither was it like the spare and lofty magnificence of those Italian apartments which had once been familiar to her. There were some small but rare pictures on the walls, and some *portraits*. Vane looked round it with the familiar satisfaction of *one who returns* to an old home.

"Thank heaven, whatever you have done to the rest of the house, Letty," he said, "you have spared my mother's old room."

"Yes," said Miss Vane, "I am far from perfection yet, if I ever attain to it. I don't expect I shall. It is not the drawing-room now, it is only the parlour; but beyond that sacrifice I can't go any further, which is contemptible. So this is Gilbert Vane's daughter? Innocent, my dear, you are very welcome. I like you for your name. Reginald and I had a sister Innocent. You must try to like me and be happy here as long as your aunt will let you stay. Sit down and pour out some tea for yourself and him;—I must go off to chapel. You are excused to-day, as your train is late. Take care of the child, Reginald, and see she has some tea. I must be off or else I shall be late as well. Very glad to see you both. *Au revoir* in half an hour."

She went on talking till she reached the door, when she disappeared, still talking and waving her hand. Her brother followed her with his kind eyes.

"Dear old Letty!" he said, "I told you we should see her in all her glory. Sit down, Innocent, and warm your poor little hands, and take your tea."

With this brief advice he left her, and went round the room, looking at all the pictures, the books, everything about. Innocent sat down as she was bid in the great easy chair. She poured out the tea as she had been bid, for herself and for him. A soft sensation of well-being stole over her; the sweetness of the mignonette outside, the tinkling of the bell, the sunshine which slanted in through the deep, small windows, and the soft warmth of the fire, all soothed the girl; but what soothed her most was the charmingly matter-of-fact way in which she had been received, in which she had been bidden to do this and that. No response, no emotion had been required from her; there was no cause for emotion; she was told what to do, and left to do it in peace. Her fright went away in this quiet moment; her whole nature was soothed; here was the place for her; now she knew and saw, and the terrors of the change fled away. She did not care for the tea, and probably would not have taken it, but that she recollected suddenly that she had been told to do so, on which recollection Innocent sipped and was glad. The afternoon was sweet, the rest and quiet were sweet after so much confused motion and vision; and it was sweet to be no longer frightened, to feel the excitement and the terror over. She did not know how long it was till the children began to stream again past the windows, and Miss Vane came back; but even then no call was made upon her. She was allowed to sit in peace while the others talked, pleasant family talk, playful discussions, inquiries after one and another. Innocent paid very little attention to the subject of the conversation, but it was a pleasant sound in her ears, and the very air of the gentle house was pleasant. Then Miss Vane took

her to one of the little rooms, with the shining casements, up-stairs, where pale roses were still looking in at the window, and showed her where to put her things, and told her at what hour she must be ready in the morning, and all that was done at the High Lodge. It was the beginning of a new life to the wondering girl. No more indulgence, consultation of her wishes—she who had no wishes! but gentle control, absolute rule, matter-of-fact kindness—nothing but obedience required of her; and that was the easiest thing to give.

Miss Vane, however, as it turned out, was as much pleased with Innocent as Innocent was with Miss Vane. After one day with his sister, which, perhaps, in the circumstances, was enough for both, John Vane set off to pay various visits, promising to return again for Innocent, and warning his sister only to keep her apart from "the Frederick Eastwoods" and Mr. Batty's house in Sterborne. This Miss Vane cheerfully agreed to do without any question; for, certainly, it was very undesirable that a relation of her own should have any intercourse or connexion with Mr. Batty's daughter. The religious vocation of the mistress of the High Lodge did not make her indifferent to the claims of family. Religious vocations seldom do; a well-born woman is well-born in a Carmelite cloister as well as in a king's court, and generally thinks quite as much of it in the one region as the other. It seemed accordingly a perfectly simple matter that Innocent should be permitted to accept no invitation from Mrs. Frederick Eastwood; and indeed no such invitation came. Otherwise things went on with the most perfect comfort between the girl and her new relation. She did not talk much, it is true; she was not interested, as Miss Vane expected her to be, in the upper school, where half-a-dozen "daughters of gentlemen" were being educated in one wing of the old house; or the lower school, where children who had no gentility to boast of were being trained in another; or in the orphanage, even though she herself was an orphan, and might have been supposed likely to "take an interest" in the young creatures—girls like herself, who found refuge there. Innocent went through the whole establishment, making no remark. When asked if she liked it, she said Yes: when asked if she was tired, she said No: when asked if she would like to see something more, she said Yes again. She smiled upon the little children, and said *ma sœur* to the sisters when they spoke to her, which pleased them. She was everything that was docile, gentle, and obedient, and she grew in a few weeks to look stronger and better than she had ever done in her life; but she did not become more communicative. One thing, however, Innocent did which found high favour in everybody's eyes. She would go and sit for hours together in the little chapel, with her eyes fixed upon the *pictured* Christ (an old Italian picture, full of true early Italian *sentiment for* the divine and holy) which was hung over the altar.



"She would go and sit for hours in the little chapel."

The chapel was low, like the house, an old Early English building in good repair, but homely as became its date, with low windows, filled with grisaille glass, dim and silvery. Here Innocent would sit, taking no note of time; it felt to her like the little church of the Spina over again; and here, as there, she said "Our Father," vaguely reverential, and sat in a soft quiescence, scarcely thinking —happy, she knew not why. The habit she thus showed commended her to the community beyond expression. She was so Catholic, so pious, so saintlike, they said; and indeed Innocent in those gentle days made the first great success of her life. It was the pause before the storm.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MINSTER AND THE VILLA.

"I MUST take you to see the Minster, Innocent," said Miss Vane. "You cannot be in this part of the world without seeing the Minster. You will be quite happy in it, you who are so fond of church. Put on your hat and your cloak, and be ready when the carriage comes round. I have got a number of visits to make and things to do; but as I know you can make yourself happy in the Minster while I am busy, I will take you with me. Have you ever seen any of our great Gothic cathedrals? Then you will be perfectly happy, child; you will feel this day an era in your life."

Little thought Lætitia Vane what she was saying. The unconscious prophecy came lightly from her lips, and was rceived by Innocent with a smile. She was not excited by the prospect of seeing the Minster, but she was pleased to go, to do what she was told, to be with the kind but arbitrary mistress, who had brought harmony into her life. She put on her hat, smiling, looking at herself in the glass, which was not very usual with her. She had gained some colour on her pale cheeks, her eyes were brighter, her whole aspect more life-like. It was a fresh October morning, warm in the sunshine, though a sharp little chill of autumn wind met them occasionally at a corner, promising a cold evening.

"We must take care not to be late coming back," said Miss Vane, throwing an additional shawl upon Innocent's lap before she got into the little carriage, and took the reins. Miss Vane herself wore no conventional costume; she had not abandoned the pleasant things of this life. She wore rich silks, moaning over her own imperfection, which never could attain to the virtue of serge, and was fond of her pretty ponies and her pleasant little carriage. They

had a cheerful drive into Sterborne, Miss Vane pointing out everything on the way, and naming every house they passed, Innocent paying little attention, yet listening to all that was said to her, and enjoying in her passive way the air, the sunshine, the rapid movement. Things no longer seemed to rush past her, moved by some dreadful whirl of their own, but it was she who was in motion, lightly, cheerfully—the centre, not a passive object in the scene. This, which she could not have explained for her life, but which she felt vaguely yet strongly, made the greatest difference to Innocent. She was more alive than she had ever been before in her life.

Miss Vane took her over the Minster, rapidly pointing out all the chief wonders; and then left her, seated within sight of the high altar, to enjoy what everybody at the High Lodge supposed to be meditation of the devoutest kind.

"You will be quite happy here," Miss Vane said, kissing her softly, and feeling, with warm compunctions for her own worldliness, how superior was her young relation. She stopped at the door, ere she went about her many businesses, to point out Innocent to the chief verger, and commend her to his care. "I will come back in about an hour and a half," she said. Thus Innocent was left alone.

I do not think she had ever been left entirely alone before, save on the one occasion of her visit to the Methodist chapel, since she had been under her aunt's care, and the sensation was sweet to her, —quite alone, silent, no one interfering with her, free to do as she would, to be still, without speaking, without feeling, without thinking. The solemn nave of the Minster, the lovely, lessening arches of the apse, the silvery glow of the painted glass in the windows, made no special impression upon her for themselves. As she sat silent they mingled in a confused but grateful calm with the little church of the Spina—the lingering memories of her past life. Subdued steps came and went about her as in the other little sanctuary by the Arno; the light was subdued as by the influence of the place; no sound above a whisper was audible; gliding figures appeared in the distance, into which she gazed, not, indeed, coming there to pray, as in Santa Maria, but yet moving softly, with a certain reverence. No gleaming tapers on the altar, no chanting priest interposed to furnish a background for her dreams; but Innocent scarcely felt the want. She said her prayers, kneeling down, all unconscious of observation, on the stone pavement. She sat down again in a hush of soft and peaceful feeling—to dream? No, nor even to think. The mind of this poor little Innocent had no need for any exercise; she rested, before the fiery coming of her fate.

It was not till the verger, much bewildered by a stillness of attitude to which he was quite unused, came to ask whether the young lady would like to see the chapter-house, or the crypt, or any

of the special sights of the Minster, that the girl was roused. She rose then, always acquiescent, smiling upon the old man. But as she turned round, Innocent's eye caught a figure much more interesting to her than the verger's. It was Frederick, who turned round at the same moment, and came forward to her, holding out both his hands. "Ah, Innocent, at last!" he cried. There was real pleasure in his face.

"Miss Vane has left me here to wait for her," said Innocent, "but, oh, I am so glad to see you!" It seemed to her that she had found him again—that all the intermediate time had glided away, that she was in the church of the Spina, and he, her new-discovered only guardian and protector again.

"I am glad that you are glad," said Frederick. "I thought you might have forgotten all about us among the Vanes. How is it that they neglect you like this? I suppose you are the poor relation there, Innocent, eh? You never were so at The Elms."

"I do not know what you mean," said Innocent; but she put her hand within his arm, with her old use and wont, looking up at him brightly with her soft smile. The verger looking on, felt that, perhaps, it was his duty to interfere, but had not the heart to do it.

"You'll find me in the porch, Miss, if you want me," he said. If the young lady had met with some one as she liked better than them Papistical nunnery-folks at the High Lodge, was it his business? He went away heavily, dragging his feet upon the pavement, as ecclesiastical attendants for ages and ages have dragged them, with stooped shoulders and shuffling gait; and the two, whom he thought lovers, were left alone.

They were not lovers, far from that; but Innocent clung to the arm of the first man whom she had ever identified and felt any warm personal regard for, and Frederick looked down upon her with a complacency which half arose from a vain belief that she loved him, and partly from a real kindness for his little cousin, and partly from a sensation of thankfulness to have some one belonging to him to look at and speak to—some one not of the terrible Batty tribe, to which he was bound until Monday morning. This was Saturday, and he had been imperatively summoned to visit his wife, who was still ill. He could not get back until Monday morning, and the thought that this terrible moment of duty might be softened by the presence of Innocent, who adored him, was sweet. He told her that Amanda was ill in bed, not able to come out with him, or to be his companion. "I cannot spend my whole time with her," said Frederick, "and her father is more odious than I can tell you. You must come to see her; you must stay with me, Innocent, till I go back."

"If Miss Vane will let me," said Innocent, brightly.

"You would like it? You were always a dear girl. When I take you home with me, Innocent," said Frederick solemnly, "you

will learn a lesson which I have learnt too late, that it is a fatal thing to connect one's self with people of a different class from one's own, who cannot understand one, whose life is a contradiction to all one feels and wishes. I don't speak, of course, of my wife; that is my own affair; whatever I may have to put up with I say nothing on that score to any one. But, Innocent, a man of honour has many things to bear which women never know."

These fine sentiments were wasted upon Innocent, who looked up at him wondering, and received what he said docilely, but made no attempt to understand. I don't know why Frederick, knowing her well enough to be aware of this, should have thought it necessary to make so solemn a statement. He did it, perhaps, from the habit he had acquired of posing as a victim to honour. He led her about the Minster, and showed her many things which Innocent looked at with her usual docility, pleased to be with him, if not much excited by anything else. She had been happy at the High Lodge, but after all Frederick was her first friend, her discovery, and to be thus alone with him, cared for by him, no one else interfering, carried her back to the first startled awakening of her torpid youth. He was always kind to her when she was thus thrown upon his care, and Innocent was happy, with her hand clinging to his arm. When Miss Vane came to recall her to the present, she looked with perhaps a warmer personal wish than had ever been seen in her eyes before at her temporary guardian, pleading for the granting of the request which Frederick made, with his very finest Charles I. look, and melancholy gentlemanlike grace. Miss Vane, a busy woman, had partially forgotten her brother's warning about Mrs. Frederick. She knew the young man before her had made a very foolish marriage, but still he was an Eastwood, of prepossessing appearance, and a compunction crossed her mind as to her want of civility in not "calling on" the daughter-in-law of Innocent's good aunt. A woman takes rank from her husband, not from her father, Miss Vane reflected, and if this poor fellow had found out, as might be guessed from his resigned manner, that he had made a terrible mistake, it was only right that a connexion should stand by him as far as was practicable. After a few difficulties, therefore, as to Innocent's dress, &c., she consented, promising to send the gardener with her bag, and to drive in for her on Monday morning, "when I will take the opportunity of leaving a card for Mrs. Eastwood. I am sorry to hear she is so poorly," said Miss Vane in her most gracious manner. Innocent could scarcely believe it when she saw her energetic relation drive away, and found herself left in Frederick's charge. "I am to stay, then?" she said, with a smile which lighted up her whole face; then added, with a faint shadow stealing over it, "but with you, Frederick? I do not like—your *wife*——"

"*You shall be* with me," said Frederick; "but, Innocent, you

must not say such things. It is imprudent—you might be misunderstood. I know very well what you mean, and that, of course, it is impossible you should feel towards poor Amanda as you do to me; but you must not forget what I have told you so often, that a woman's best policy is always to make friends with her own sex. You are coming now, you understand, to visit my wife, who is far from well; but I shall take care to have you a great deal with me."

Innocent's enjoyment was a little damped by this long speech; but as she was still walking with Frederick, and had, as yet, no drawback to the pleasant sensation of being with him, the shadow flitted rapidly from her face. He took her all over the village, showing her everything that was to be seen, before he turned his step towards the Villa, where Amanda, fretful and peevish, awaited him, longing for news, for change, for something to amuse her. Frederick cared very little for the fact that his once-worshipped beauty was now waiting for him. His little cousin, with her dreamy delight in his society, her refined and gradually developing beauty, and the strange attraction of her visionary abstractedness from the common world, was very amusing and pleasant to him. The mere fact of not seeing her every day, as he had been in the habit of doing, had made him perceive Innocent's beauty, and a mingled feeling, half wholly good, half dubious in character, inclined him towards the girl who clung to him. She was very pretty and "very fond of him," which pleased his vanity highly, and made him feel vaguely self-complacent and on good terms with himself in her company; and by the side of this doubtful and not very improving sensation, the man, who was not wholly bad, had actually a little wholesome, brotherly, protecting affection for the child who had clung to him from the first moment of seeing him. Thus they wandered through the village, round and round the Minster, looking at everything and at nothing till the October afternoon began to cloud over. "Now you must come and see Amanda," said Frederick with a sigh. Innocent sighed too. It seemed to her very hard that there was this inevitable "Frederick's wife" to be always the shadow to the picture, to take him away from his family, to separate him from herself, to worry and vex him whatever he was doing. Innocent hesitated at the corner of the street.

"Are you sure I should go?" she said. "She will scold me. She will not be kind like Cousin Lætitia or you. She does not like me, and I do not like her. Shall I go back now? I have had all I wanted, Frederick; I have seen you."

"That would never do," said Frederick. "If it were known that you had met me in the Minster and walked about so long with me, and then returned without seeing my wife, people would talk —unpleasant things would be said."

"What could be said?" asked Innocent.

"Upon my life, one doesn't know whether to laugh at you or

be angry," cried Frederick, impatient. "Will you never understand? But, come along, it is no use wasting words. Don't you see you must come now?"

"I do not want to come. She will scold me," said Innocent, standing firmly, with a cloud upon her face. It was the first time she had openly resisted him or any one. Poor child, was it some angel who stayed her feet? She felt ready to cry, which was an unusual thing with her, and with a frightened instinctive recoil, stood still, refusing to go on.

Poor Innocent! Safety and shelter, and the life of order and peace which suited her half-developed faculties, lay calm and sunshiny on one side. On the other was conflict, confused darkness and misery, pain and shame, gathering in heavy clouds to swallow her up. For one moment it hung on the balance which her fate was to be; terrible moment, which we, none of us, divine, during which we have to exercise that great and awful choice which is the privilege of humanity, in blindness and unconsciousness, ignorant of the issues, stupid to the importance of the decision. This was decided, however, not by Innocent. Impatient Frederick seized her hand and drew it through his arm.

"This is folly," he cried. "What you, Innocent! you be such a little traitor and resist me and get me into trouble? No, no, come along. This is out of the question now."

Next moment he had knocked at his father-in-law's door.

The Villa looked very much as it had done the day that Frederick first made his appearance there. The sun was still shining by intervals, but glimmers of firelight came from the window, and the garden behind was spare of flowers. Mr. Batty met them as they came in, and stared hard at the girl whom Frederick led by the hand into the narrow light passage which traversed the house from the street to the garden door. "This is my cousin, sir, Miss Innocent Vane," said Frederick. "I have brought her to see Amanda. She is on a visit at the High Lodge, as you may have heard."

"Oh, yes, I've heard," said Batty, "and I think it's time she should turn up, the only one of your family as has ever come near my girl. You're welcome, my dear, better late than never; though I think, considering how kind the Eastwoods have been to you, that you might have come a little sooner to show Mrs. Frederick some respect."

Innocent listened, wondering, to this address, gazing at the man whom she had a confused recollection of having seen before. All that she comprehended now was, more or less, that he was scolding her, though about what she could not tell. He was a kind of man totally unknown to Innocent—his thick figure, his coarse air, his loud voice and red hands, surprised, without so much revolting her as they might have done, had her organization been more per-

fect. She was frightened, but made an effort of politeness to conceal it.

"Is she better?" she asked, not knowing what to say.

"You'll see what she'll say to you when she sees you," said Batty to Frederick with a chuckle, "and I don't blame her, poor girl. If this is what you call visiting your wife when she's poorly, things have changed since my day. It's close on five, and nearly time for dinner, and you've been out since the moment you swallowed your lunch."

"I have been with my little cousin here, and Miss Vane of the High Lodge, who is coming to call on Amanda on Monday," said Frederick. "In the meantime I took the liberty of inviting my cousin to stay with my wife for a couple of nights. I hope it is practicable——"

"Oh, practicable enough," said Batty, with a laugh. "I'm not one of those as leaves themselves without a room to give to a friend. Plenty of accommodation here for as many as you like to bring—and the more the merrier, if they're the right sort. Glad to see you, Miss Innocent. Training up for your trade, eh?—at that old nunnery out there. Lord, to see that old Lady Abbess in my house will be a sight! 'Manda will tackle her, I'll be bound. Walk up, walk up-stairs, Eastwood will show you the way; and he's sure of a warm welcome, he is. Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Batty stood in the passage holding his sides, while Frederick, with disgust on every line of his fine features, strode up-stairs. Innocent followed her cousin wondering. What the man meant, whether he was merry, or angry, or simply the most disagreeable strange man she had ever seen, she could not make out. She remembered vaguely what Frederick had told her so lately—what she had heard repeated on all sides at The Elms—that Frederick's wife was of "another class." And the stairs were narrow, the passage contracted, the maid who had opened the door not like the maids at The Elms; and Batty's dress, and appearance, and manner of speech very different from anything Innocent had ever known before. This was what it meant, then, to be of "another class." Thus she followed with some new speculations rising in her passive brain, into the presence of Frederick's wife.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MOMENT OF FATE.

FREDERICK led Innocent to the door of a bedroom which opened from a little gallery up-stairs. He paused there before he opened it.

"If we find Amanda in an excitable state, you must not mind it," he said; "you must not be frightened. Forgive her because she is ill. It is her way——"

With these words of warning he opened the door. It was a pretty room enough—meant to be luxurious—in a somewhat tawdry style of decoration, yet tolerable, in so far that its rose-coloured hangings and heavy fringes were fresh at least, and in good order. Amanda was in bed, with a blue dressing-gown over her shoulders, and her elaborately-dressed hair adorned with a small lace cap. Nothing could be gayer than the composition of colour, her own rose-cheeks and golden hair, the bright blue garment in which she was clothed, and the blue ribbon in her little cap, all relieved against the rose-coloured hangings. A perfect Watteau, some one had told her, this composition made, and, though she did not know what a Watteau was, she felt it must be something fine, and kept up the successful combination. Her cheeks were not pale, but flushed with anger, impatience, and excitement. She burst forth almost before Frederick had come into the room.

"This is how you visit your wife, is it, Mr. Frederick Eastwood? —Three mortal hours have I been left alone without a creature to speak to but aunty. How dare you face me after that? how dare you? I have a hundred minds never to speak to you again——"

"That would be to punish yourself more than me, my dear," said Frederick, with the conventional speech of the injured husband.

She looked at his careless smile, and her fury increased.

"I should like to throw something at you," she cried. You cold, wicked, careless, unprincipled wretch! Was it for this you married me, and pretended to be fond of me? Was it for this you took me from my father, who was always so kind? Was it for this——"

"Of course it was for all that," said Frederick, advancing to the bedside. "We have gone through the list before. Amanda, try to keep your temper; it will be the best thing for you. Here is Innocent, whom I found in the Minster, and who has come to pay you a visit. Miss Vane is coming on Monday to fetch her; and if you play your cards well——"

Amanda interrupted him by a shrill laugh.

"Oh, so here is Innocent! and the old nun is coming?—a great deal I care! This is how you try to hoodwink me. Innocent, come *here! How long* has he been walking about with you, talking, and *holding your hand,* and turning your head, you little fool? You

think he cares? He cares as much for you as he does for me; he cares for no one but himself. Oh, go away, or I shall throw something at you! Go away, or——"

She had put out her hand to clutch at a glass which stood by her on a little table.

"Go! Go!" cried some one from behind the curtain.

Frederick made a rapid step to the door, but before he had reached it his wife's mood had changed.

"Oh, *you* tell him to go, do you?" she cried. "Then I tell him to stay. Come here, Innocent; you shall stay and nurse me; I know you'll like it; and, Fred, turn that woman out—turn her off, turn her out of doors. She has been my plague ever since I can recollect. Oh, you thought you would keep me all to yourself, did you, and get the better of me? but I haven't got a husband for nothing. Fred, turn her out of doors."

Frederick opened the door with servile haste. He dragged the poor aunty, the *souffre-douleur* of the household, out by the sleeve, escaping himself along with her. Amanda leant back upon her pillow, laying her hand upon her breast.

"How hot it is," she said, panting. "Open the window—take this fan and fan me; can't you make yourself useful? Oh, you are well named; you are a true Innocent! If you will tell me all that he was saying to you, I will forgive you. Tell me what he said."

"He told me that I was to come and see you; that I was not to be frightened," said the girl, who was trembling, yet not confused by mental dread, as she had sometimes felt on less occasion.

"And are you frightened?"

"N—no." She spoke with a little hesitation, but still succeeded in making this answer. She did not shrink from Amanda's blazing red-hazel eyes. The excited creature somehow did not alarm her. She had done all that Amanda had told her with the happy habit of instant obedience, which she had learned at the High Lodge, and kept fanning her, according to her orders, as she spoke.

"You are very odd," said Amanda, whose passion was over. "But you know how to fan one; not like that woman who saws the air like a windmill. You may take off your hat and sit down by me. I have a hasty temper. I sometimes say things and do things I am sorry for; but I'm very good-hearted. There, sit down and let us have a talk. Weren't you glad to get off? Don't you hate that old cat, with her sermons and her prayers? So she is coming to call?—what an honour, to be sure, for me! But I think the Eastwoods can hold up their heads as high as the Vanes any day—and she's nothing but an interloper. Why, John Vane's father bought that house," said Amanda; "it is no more an old family place than this is. I am glad you are going to stay. If you are a good girl, I will try what I can do for you, and make a friend of you. I never could make a friend of that little stuck-up Nelly

What airs she does give herself to be sure! and not so much to be proud of. Why, that wretched little Molyneux, that she thinks such great things, is no better than a shopkeeper's grandson. I know the judge's father was a jeweller in Brook Street, and there is nothing so very grand in having a judge in the family, unless you were going to be tried for your life, and wanted him to get you off——"

"Can judges get people off?" said Innocent. Heaven knows why she asked such a question! It was an echo rather of her companion's last words than said by any free-will of her own. But Frederick heard it as he came in, and so did poor aunty, who stood outside, trembling at the door.

"Of course they can, you little stupid. It is all they are good for," said Amanda, benignantly. "Oh, you may come in. I am such a soft-hearted ninny, I always forgive people when my passion is over. And none of you ought to cross me; you know you oughtn't. Some of these days, if you don't mind, just to punish you I shall die——"

She laughed and laid her head back upon the pillow, with her blue ribbons and blue gown thrown sharply out by the rose-coloured bed. She was amused by her own threat. But passion and self-indulgence had made great havoc in the undisciplined creature, and to a serious looker-on that menace would have seemed not so unlikely as Amanda thought, to come to reality. Her breath came quick and with difficulty, heaving her breast at every respiration. A high hectic colour was on her cheek, and the cheekbones themselves which bore these dangerous roses were sharpened by the wasting processes of continual excitement. Innocent stood all this time by the bed, fanning her slowly and steadily. She was getting tired, but did not think of stopping till she was told. Her visionary looks, and the mechanical occupation which was so much more natural to her than anything of a visionary character, contrasted strangely, as she stood thus docile, always passive, by that bed. I suppose she would literally have gone on for ever, like an Eastern slave, had no one interposed.

This steady service pleased Amanda hugely. She took full advantage of it, keeping the girl employed until her very arm was drooping with the fatigue of the monotonous motion; and she was so generous as to allow Frederick to sit down and tell her "the news." Frederick had brought down, as in duty bound, a few scandalous anecdotes from the fountain-head of gossip—anecdotes circumstantialized by date and name, but probably as false as was the taste that desired them. He made, indeed, a few demurs at repeating these wonderful pieces of history before Innocent, which were speedily silenced by his wife.

"Innocent is paying no attention. She never listens to what any *one says,*" cried Amanda, "and, besides, no one thinks of that sort *of old-fashioned* nonsense nowadays. Go on——"

In this edifying way the time was spent till dinner. Amanda declared that she never felt better, that she would certainly get up next day. "And I'll go to church at the Minster if there is a good anthem," she said, "and you shall give me your arm, Fred, and everybody will think us a model couple." This last outburst of amiability was called forth by a delightful piece of scandal about what the newspapers called a very elevated personage, and which Frederick vouched for as authentic. Mrs. Frederick, whose "set" were of those who called the heir to the throne by the name of his principality *tout court*, was altogether conciliated by this delightful communication. Innocent, as Amanda said, paid very little attention. She listened yet did not listen, half pleased that Frederick seemed pleased, half wondering, by an instinct which was more penetrating than reason, that he should be satisfied, and should take so much trouble to keep Amanda in good temper. Innocent was not observant, she was not conscious of any faculty of criticism in her own undeveloped mind; she made no voluntary contrast between Frederick in this fretful sick chamber trying to please, and Frederick at home, contemptuously indifferent to what any one did or said. Only a little vague wonder at him rose in her mind; her sense of Mrs. Frederick's imperfections was not more distinct than the mere feeling of personal dislike—dislike which was not softened by this sight of her, or by the exacting and selfish demands she made upon everybody. Innocent was born to obey. She did what Miss Vane had told her with the most docile unquestioning readiness, and with the consent of her whole being; and she did also whatever Mrs. Frederick told, but with how different a feeling. That she could have explained the difference to herself, or that she even fully defined and recognized it, I am far from asserting; but the fact that she was conscious of this difference was at least a proof of the expanding of her mental powers.

Mrs. Frederick consented that her husband and Innocent should leave her to go to dinner, with reluctance, but she did consent, Before the meal was over, however, they heard loud and repeated knockings on the floor above, signals of her impatience. Frederick was in a state of unusual exhilaration, perhaps excited by finding the weary evening pass less disagreeably than he thought—for Innocent, passive as she was, was yet a shield between him and his coarse father-in-law; and even Amanda's knocking, as he was out of her reach, did not disturb him.

"Come round the garden with me while I smoke my cigar," he said, "and then you can go to her."

The evening was soft and warm and mellow, with a large full October moon less white than usual, throwing broad beams of the palest gold over the dark garden. Batty watched them go out with doubtful eyes, unable quite to keep himself from vulgar interpretations of Innocent's submission to her cousin, yet confident in the power of

"my girl" to retain her husband's devotion, and caring very little about the other. Besides he was flattered in spite of himself that Innocent should be there under his roof. Two great families, the one more "stuck up" than the other, seemed thus to be holding out an olive branch to him, and already Batty felt himself mounting the steps of social grandeur. He sat over his port, meditating on the moment when he could change that drink for more natural brandy and water—when another vehement assault upon the floor overhead roused him.

"She'll make herself worse than ever," Batty said to himself; and going to the stairs he shouted in his great voice, "Steady there, steady, 'Manda. She's a coming; she's a coming." Then he went out into the garden to seek the other two. The grass was wet with dew, the leaves, which had begun to change colour, showed like flowers in the moonlight. He followed the soft sound of sauntering steps along two or three windings of the path. Then he came in sight of the pair he sought; Frederick was walking along indifferently enough, smoking his cigar, with one hand thrust into his pocket! Innocent by his side held his arm so cavalierly and carelessly bent with her hand. She went along by him like his shadow; she looked up at him with a half smile upon her face, to which the moonlight lent an aspect of deeper and more impassioned self-devotion than Innocent knew. Frederick, in low tones, and with now and then a demonstrative gesture of the disengaged hand with which he sometimes took his cigar from his lips, was laying down the law about something. Probably he was inculcating that first duty of woman, to "consider me, not yourself," or some other equally plain and fundamental principle. The sight struck Batty with a certain jealousy by reflection. So intimate a conversation could scarcely be without somehow infringing upon the rights of "his girl." Had it been Frederick's sister, probably he would have had the same feeling; but in that case he would have been less at liberty to interfere.

"Hollo!" he said, "don't you know Mrs. Frederick is all alone, while you two are gallivanting and philandering here? Come along, Miss; you're safer with my 'Manda than with that young spark. *I* know him better than you do. Come along, come along, or she'll bring down the house; and not much wonder either if she saw as much as I see—but I'll tell no tales," he said, with a coarse laugh.

Innocent stood bewildered with the sudden shock—for at the moment that Batty's voice became audible, Frederick, with an instinctive movement, cast her off from his arm. To her who knew no wrong, who thought no evil, this movement was simply incomprehensible. He was angry, that could be the only reason; but why, or with whom? She stood turning her wandering looks towards *Batty, towards* the house, with its lighted windows, the moonbeams *pouring over her,* lighting up her raised face, with its wistful gaze.

Frederick, as an expression of his feeling, tossed away the end of his cigar.

"We were coming in," he said. "Innocent, perhaps you had better go first, and let me know if I'm wanted. I am tired. Tell Amanda I have got some letters to write, office work which I was obliged to bring with me. Batty, suppose you order some coffee, and let me get to work," he added, carelessly leading the way into the house. He left Innocent to follow as she might, and to deal with Batty as she might. He had put up with him long enough; he saw no reason for exerting himself further now.

"Confound his impudence!" said Batty. "Now, Miss, come along. You'd best stay with 'Manda, if you'll take my advice, while you are here."

"If you please," said Innocent, with a sigh.

"Oh, if *I* please—you'd rather be with *him*, eh? Pleasanter ain't it?" said Batty, with a grin of airy raillery.

"Yes," said simple Innocent. "I know Frederick, and I don't know you." A courteous instinct which she could not have explained kept her from adding that she did not like Mrs. Frederick, which was her usually unconcealed sentiment. She added quite gravely, altogether unaware that his laugh had anything to do with her, "if I am to go to Frederick's wife, will you show me the way?"

Batty led the way without another word—he was curiously impressed by her gravity, by a certain solemn simplicity about the pale creature, who stood there facing him in the moonlight impervious to his gibes. He took her to his daughter's room, and looked in, giving Amanda a word of warning. "Keep your temper, 'Manda," he said; I do not know that he could have explained why.

This was what Amanda was little inclined to do. She assailed Innocent with a storm of questions; what had she been doing? where had she been?

"I have been in the garden with Frederick," said the girl, with that serious and quiet calm, which already had so much impressed Mrs. Frederick's father.

"In the garden with Frederick! and you tell me so with that bold face! What was he doing? what was he saying? oh, I know him, and his false ways," said the excited wife; "making you think all sorts of things, you little fool—and then sending you to me with your innocent face. Innocent, indeed! Oh, no; I did'nt call—I don't want you. Innocent, to be sure! You are a pretty Innocent for the nunnery; just the sort of creature to go there if all tales be true—to learn to deceive—as if you wanted teaching! You never thought of me lying up here, while you went wandering about the garden with Frederick—nor he didn't, neither. Who cares for me? I was everything that was sweet before I married, but now much he cares. Oh, if I just had him here to tell him

what I think of him! Call him to tell him what I think of him—both him and you!"

Innocent had never been thrown upon her own resources before. She was not prepared for the emergency, and had those who loved her best foreseen the possibility of such a trial for her she never would have been allowed to risk it; but in the meantime it did her good. A certain curious practical faculty had been developed in her by the life of rule and order at the High Lodge. She went forward to the bedside with her visionary look, but the most serious matter-of-fact meaning, ignoring the passion as completely as if it did not exist; which, indeed, to her it did not, being a thing beyond her range of perception.

"You make yourself ill when you are angry," she said, seriously, looking down upon Amanda's worn and flushed countenance; "it makes you very ill; it would be far better not to be angry. When you scold me I am sorry; but it does not make me ill. It hurts you most. You should stop yourself when you feel it coming on; because, perhaps, when you are scolding you might die—and it would be better to live and not to scold. I have thought about it, and that is what I think."

Amanda was aghast at this speech—it subdued her as if a baby had suddenly opened its mouth, and uttered words of wisdom. She gave a gasp, half of wonder, half of terror, and felt herself checked and subdued as she had never been in her life before. The effect was so strange that she did not know what to make of it. She tried to laugh, and failed; finally, she said, "What an odd girl you are!" and settled down among her pillows, calmed in spite of herself. "Read to me," she said, after a little pause, thrusting a book into Innocent's hand. The calm was as sudden as the storm. The moment that she was told to do something definite Innocent resumed her usual obedient frame of mind, after this the longest speech she had ever made, and the most completely independent mental action she had ever been conscious of. She sat down and read, opening the book where she was told, pursuing without a question the course of a foolish story. She never thought of asking who or what were the personages she suddenly began to read about; she took the book as she had taken the fan, and used it in a similar way. And then there followed a curious little interval of calm. Amanda had prepared herself for the night while the others were at dinner; she had taken off her blue dressing-gown and her pretty ribbons; she was all white now, ready to go to sleep when the moment came. The room had been partially darkened for the same reason. Behind the curtain at the head of the bed was a lamp shaded from the eyes, but the other lights had been taken away, and the profound quiet grew slumbrous as Innocent's soft voice rose through it, reading *steadily* and gently with a certain sweet monotony. I cannot tell *how long* Innocent continued reading. The calm grew more and

more profound; no one came near the room; Amanda's retirement was not invaded. Innocent herself grew drowsy as she listened to her own voice; it rose and fell with a gentle, but incessant, repetition; sometimes she would almost fall asleep, stumbling over the words—and then, as Mrs. Frederick, who was drowsy too, stirred and murmured at the cessation of the voice which acted upon her like a lullaby, the girl would resume her reading, startled into wakefulness. Once or twice poor aunty, who had been banished from the room, put in her head noiselessly at the door, and withdrew it as gently, seeing that all was still. Batty himself once did the same; but the household was too glad of the unusual stillness to do anything to disturb it. At length the soft girlish voice, after repeated breaks and faltering recommencements, dropped altogether, and Innocent fell fast asleep, with her head leaning upon the back of her chair, and the book in her clasped hands. She and the lamp by which she had been reading and the little table covered with medicine phials, were separated from the sleeper in the bed by the dropped curtain, which threw a rose-coloured reflection over Amanda in her sleep; this lasted for an hour or two, during which the patient and the young attendant who was so little used to watch, slept peacefully with but the veil of this curtain between them. Then Amanda began to stir. Her sleep was always broken and uncertain; the poor aunty to whom she was so cruel had accustomed her to constant and unfailing attendance—and when she woke and called and saw no one, sudden wrath flamed up in Amanda's bosom. Gradually the circumstances came back upon her mind, and plucking back the curtain she saw poor Innocent quietly sleeping, her hair falling in the old childish way about her shoulders, and her dark eyelashes resting on her cheek, which looked so pale under them. Amanda did not care for the weary grace and *abandon* of the girl's attitude, nor was she at all touched by the thought that Innocent had been occupied in her own service to her last moment of consciousness. Mrs. Frederick, on the contrary, was furious to find herself "left alone" with no obsequious nurse ready to attend to her wants. She shrieked at Innocent to rouse her, and stretching out of bed shook the girl, who started violently, and sprang up trembling and nervous. Amanda's eyes were blazing, her figure trembling with sudden irritation.

"How dare you fall asleep?" she cried, "am I to be left with no one to take care of me? oh, you all want to kill me. Give me my drops, you cruel, wicked, sleepy, lazy, wicked girl! You don't know how?—oh, you know well enough how to walk about with my husband—how to make love to him. My drops! can't you understand?—there, in that bottle; you can read, I suppose, though you are a fool. Oh, to leave me to this horrid girl! Oh, to have no one to take care of me! My drops? can't you hear? I'll make it heard all over the house. My drops! Oh, you little idiot, can't you do

that much? I always said you was a fool; walk about with another woman's husband—torment a man with clinging to him—but as for being of use. My drops! Put them in the glass, idiot! Can't you see I want to go to sleep?"

Innocent trembling, chilled, ignorant, incapable, only half awake, took the bottle that was pointed out to her, and endeavoured, as she had seen people do, to drop the liquid into a glass; she failed twice over in her fright and tremor. Then she kneeled down by the table to try for the third time, propping herself up against the chair. I don't know what thoughts might be passing unconscious through her mind. I don't think she was conscious of anything, except the miserable feeling of sudden waking—the cold, the sense of being beaten down with angry words—and the frightened attempt to do what she could not do, in obedience to the fiercest order she had ever received in her life. Where she knelt, painfully endeavouring to count the drops of the opiate, she was within reach of Amanda's arm, who by this time had worked herself into a wild, shrieking passion. Once more she dashed aside the curtain, and plucked at Innocent, calling to her with words which had become unintelligible to the ears of the frightened girl. "Give it me, you fool—give it me, you fool!" she said, then snatched the glass out of Innocent's hand, and lifted it to her lips. Between the fright of the one and the passion of the other the bottle had been half emptied into the glass. Amanda held it for a moment in one hand, grasping Innocent with the other, and trying to recover breath. She was past thinking of any consequences, as Innocent was past knowing what was happening under her eyes. With a sudden long effort to regain her breath she put the glass to her panting lips, and drank it. How much she swallowed no one ever knew; the glass dropped out of her hand, spilling some dark drops upon the white coverlid, and Amanda dropped back heavily upon the pillows. Then there followed such a stillness as seemed to make the whole house, the very walls, shiver. Innocent, with the little phial clutched in one hand, with Amanda's fingers slowly relaxing from the other, stood stupefied, listening to the horrible stillness. Oh, God, what did it mean?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FLIGHT.

THE inhabitants of the Villa were well used to the sudden sounds and sudden stillnesses which marked the changes of Amanda's moods, and on ordinary occasions no one thought of interfering or taking any notice. So long as aunty was there these were recognized as her share of the advantages of this life, and the rest of the household left her in undisturbed enjoyment of her privileges. But somehow on this evening other sentiments had been called into being. Aunty herself loved, in her way, the wilful creature whom she had nursed all her life, notwithstanding the ill recompense she received, and could not take advantage of the unusual holiday she was having. Instead of going to bed, she hung about the passages, sometimes listening at Amanda's door, more vigilant, more wakeful than ever. The maids who slept above were wakeful too. They were interested in the visitor, the curious pale girl who was one of Mr. Eastwood's great relations, "a real lady," and so much unlike the usual visitors to the house. Besides, though both the patient and her poor little unaccustomed attendant had slept, it was still comparatively early, about the hour of midnight. I do not know what there was peculiar in the stillness that crept through the house. Often enough before Amanda had fainted after one of her paroxysms of passion, and everything had gone on as usual, no one except her special nurse being much the wiser. But on this night a still horror seemed to creep through the place. The women up-stairs rose from their beds with a sensation of alarm, and poor aunty stood trembling at the door, not knowing whether to venture in, at the risk of disturbing the quiet, or stay outside at the risk perhaps of neglecting the patient. The moments are long in such an emergency. It seemed to her, I think wrongly, that this stillness had lasted full half an hour, when at last, emboldened by terror, and stimulated by the appearance on the stairs of the frightened housemaid in her nightgown, whispering "Was anything the matter?" she opened softly the door of the room. All that aunty could see was Innocent, standing, gazing at the bed on which, to all appearance, the patient lay calm, with the softened reflection of the rose-coloured curtain over her. Innocent stood like a statue, white, immovable, gazing. Aunty stole in, frightened, with noiseless steps, afraid lest some creak of the floor should betray her presence. She laid her hand softly on Innocent's shoulder.

"Is she asleep?" she asked.

Innocent awoke as from a trance.

"What is it?" she said shivering, and in low tones of terror. "Look, look! what does it mean——"

Next moment a great cry rang through the silent house—the windows were thrown open, the bells rung, the maids rushed in, half frantic with excitement; what was it? A dreadful interval followed while they crowded about the bed, and while aunty, moaning, weeping, calling upon Amanda, tried to raise the senseless figure, to bring back animation by all the means which she had so often used before. The wild yet subdued bustle of such a terrible domestic incident, the hurried sending for the doctor, the running hither and thither for remedies, the strange dream-like horror of that one unresponsive, unmoving figure in the midst of all this tumult of anxious but bootless effort—how can I describe it? The cold night air poured into the room, ineffectually summoned to give breath to the lips that could draw breath no longer, and waved the lights about like things distracted, and chilled the living to the bone, as they ran to and fro, seeking this and that, making one vain effort after another. Innocent stood behind, leaning against the wall, like a marble image. She had been pushed aside by the anxious women. She stood with her eyes fixed on the bed, with a vague horror on her face. It was a dream to her, which had begun in her sleep; was she sleeping still? or was this a horrible reality? or what had she to do with it? she, a little while ago the chief actor, now the spectator, helpless, knowing nothing, yet with a chill of dread gnawing at her, like the fox in the fable, gnawing her heart. Innocent's head seemed to turn round and round, as the strange group which had swept in, made all those wild circles round the bed, doing one strange thing after another, incoherent to her—moving and rustling, and talking low under the disturbed waving of the lights, and in the shadow of the curtains. When, after a long terrible interval, these figures dispersed, and one alone remained, throwing itself upon the bed in wild weeping, the girl roused herself.

"What is it?" she asked, drawing a step nearer. "What is it?" It seemed to Innocent that something held her, that she could not look at the figure in the bed.

"Oh, my darling! my darling! I have nursed her from a baby—she never was but good to me. Oh, my child, my 'Manda! Will you never speak to me again! Oh, 'Manda, my darling! Oh, my lovely angel!" Thus poor aunty moaned and wept.

"What is it?" cried Innocent, with a voice which took authority from absolute despair.

"Oh, can't you see for yourself? It's you as has done it, driving that angel wild. She's dead! Oh, merciful Heaven, she's dead——"

Then a sudden flood of light seemed to pour through Innocent's darkened mind. The horror which she had felt vaguely took shape and form. Heaven help the child! She had done it! She gave a low wild cry, and looked round her with a despairing appeal to *heaven and earth.* Was there no one to protect her—no one to *help her? One* moment she paused, miserable, bewildered, then



Down the narrow staircase poor Innocent fled noiseless, like a thief.

turned and fled out of the awful room, where so much had befallen her. What could she do? where could she go? She fled as an animal flies to its cover—to its home, unreasoning, unthinking. Frederick would have represented that home to her in any other circumstances; but she had killed Frederick's wife. This horror seemed to take form and pursue her. The maids were all gone: one to call the unhappy father, one to the husband, another to watch for the doctor; this last had left the door open, through which another blast of night-air swept through the house. Down the narrow staircase poor Innocent fled noiseless, like a thief. Upon a table in the passage lay her hat as she had thrown it off when she came in that afternoon with Frederick, and the warm wrap in which Miss Vane had enveloped her when they started, so peacefully, so happily, for their drive. Was it only that morning? The High Lodge, and its orderly life and its calm inhabitants, seemed to Innocent like things she had known ages ago; older even than Pisa and Niccolo—almost beyond the range of memory. She stole out at the open door, drawing Miss Vane's great shawl round her, and for a moment feeling comforted in the chill of her misery by its warmth. For one second she stood on the step, with the moonlight on her face, wondering where she was to go. The maid who was watching for the doctor saw her, and cried out with terror, thinking her a ghost. Then a sudden cloud came over the moon, and in that shelter, like a guilty thing, Innocent stole away. She did not know where to go. She wandered on through the dark and still village streets to the great Minster, with some vain childish imagination of taking refuge there. But here chance befriended the unhappy girl, or some kind angel guided her. The railway was close by, with some lights yet unextinguished. Vaguely feeling that by that was the only way home, she stole into the station, with some notion of hiding herself till she could get away. The express train to town, which stopped at Sterborne, though poor Innocent knew nothing of it, was late that night. It had just arrived when she got in. The little station was badly lighted, the officials sleepy and careless. By instinct Innocent crept into an empty carriage, not knowing even that it was going on, and in five minutes more was carried, unconscious, wrapt in a tragic stupor of woe and terror, away from the scene of this terrible crisis of her life.

Gradually, slowly, the sense of motion roused her, brought her to herself. In her hand, firmly clasped, was the little phial which had been so deadly. She unclosed her fingers with an effort, and looked at it with miserable curiosity. *That* had done it—a thing so small that it was hidden altogether in her small and delicate hand. What had Innocent done? How could she have helped herself? What could she have done different? For the first time in all her life she turned her hot confused eyes upon herself. She tried to go back over the events of the night;—not as in a mental survey with all

their varieties of feeling disclosed, but like an external picture did they rise before her. First that moment when she (Innocent could think of her now by no name) was not angry or scolding, when Frederick sat and talked, and she herself stood and fanned *her*, the central figure to which henceforward all her terrified thoughts must cling. Then came the moonlight in the garden, the smell of the dewy earth, and her hand on Frederick's arm; then the reading, which seemed like some strange incantation, some spell of slumbrous power; then the horrible sudden waking, the clutch of that hot hand, the incoherent half-conscious effort she made to do what was told her, the black drops of liquid falling, the interrupted counting which she seemed to try to take up again and complete—"ten, eleven, fifteen;" and then the terror of the renewed clutch and grasp, the sudden stillness, the black drops standing out on the white coverlid, the great open eyes dilated, fixed upon her, holding her fast so that she could not stir. God help the child! She cried aloud, but the noise drowned her cry; she struggled under the intolerable sense of anguish, the burden of the pang which she could not get free from, could not shake off. So many pangs come in youth which are imaginary, which can be thrown off, as the first impression fades; but when for the first time there comes something which fixes like the vulture, which will not be got rid of!—Innocent writhed under it, holding up her feeble hands in an appeal beyond words—an appeal which was hopeless and which was vain.

It was still only the middle of the night when she arrived in London, and by some fortunate chance or other crept out again without being perceived. Poor child! Far from her distraught soul was any intention of deceiving; she thought nothing at all about it, and in her innocence, without consciousness of harm, escaped all penalties and questioning. She did not know her way about London, but by mere chance took the right direction, and by dint of wandering on and on, came at last by a hundred detours, as morning began to break into a region with which she was familiar. The movement did her good. She felt her misery less when she was walking on and on through interminable streets, wrapping her shawl about her, feeling her limbs ready to sink under her, and her power of feeling dulled by fatigue. Probably this exercise saved her from going mad altogether. Life and more than life hung on the balance. She was not clever; she had no grasp of mind, no power of reason, nothing which could be called intellectual development at all, and yet the difference between sanity and insanity was as much to her as to others. She kept her reason through the subduing force of this exercise, the blessed movement and the weariness of body which counteracted the unaccustomed struggles of her *mind*.

It was gray dawn, that chill twilight of the morning which is so *much colder and less* genial than the twilight of night, when Inno-

cent came at last in sight of her home. Her strength and courage were almost at an end, but her feeble heart leapt up within her at sight of the familiar place in which she knew shelter and comfort were to be found. She had never said anything which showed her appreciation of her aunt's tenderness, and had offered but little response to all the affection that had been lavished on her; but yet a slow-growing trust had arisen in her mind. She had no doubt how she was to be received; she knew that kind arms would take her in, kind eyes pity her, kind voices soothe her trouble—and never in all her life had Innocent stood in such need of succour. The house was like some one asleep, with its eyes closed, so to speak, the shutters shut, the curtains drawn, and no one stirring. Innocent sat down upon the step to wait. She did not ring or knock for admittance. She sat down and leant upon the pillar of the porch with a patience which had some hope in it. She could wait now, for her difficulties were over, and her goal within reach. She had fallen half asleep when the housemaid undid the door, and with a scream perceived the unexpected watcher.

"Miss Innocent!" cried the woman, half in terror, half in disapproval; for indeed Innocent's odd ways were the wonder of the house, and the servants professed openly that they would not be surprised whatever she might choose to do. Innocent opened her eyes and roused herself with an effort.

"Yes, it is me," she said softly. "I had to come home—by the night train."

"Oh, how could any one let you wander about like this!" cried the maid, "and where is your luggage? Come to the kitchen, miss, there's no other fire lighted. You are as cold as ice, and all of a tremble. Come in, come in for goodness' sake, and I'll make you a cup of tea."

Innocent smiled her habitual smile of vague and dreamy sweetness in acknowledgment of this kindness—but she shook her head and went straight up-stairs to the door of Mrs. Eastwood's room. Her first arrival there came up before her as she paused at the door—her dissatisfaction, her indifference—oh, if she had stayed in the little room, within Nelly's, within the mother's, could this thing have happened to her, could any such harm have reached her? This question floated wistfully before her mind, increasing the strange confusion of feelings of which she was vaguely conscious; but she did not pause for more than an instant. Mrs. Eastwood was still asleep, or so at least Innocent thought; but the very aspect of the familiar room was consolatory. It seemed to protect her, to make her safe. She stole softly to the alcove where the grey morning light struggled in through the closed curtains. As Innocent approached Mrs. Eastwood opened her eyes, with the instinctive promptitude of a mother, used to be appealed to at all times and seasons. She started at the sight of the strange figure in

hat and shawl, and sat up in her bed, with all her faculties suddenly collecting to her, to prepare her for the something, she knew not what, which she instinctively felt to have befallen.

"Innocent! Good heavens, how have you come? What is the matter?" she cried. Innocent fell down on her knees by the bed; the fatigue, the cold, the personal suffering of which up to this moment she had been scarcely conscious, seemed suddenly to overflow, and become too much for her to bear. She clasped Mrs. Eastwood's arm between her own, and looked up to her with a ghastly face, and piteous looks of appeal; her lips moved, but no words came. Now she had got to the end of her journey, the end of her troubles; but now all capacity seemed to fail her. She could not do more.

"My child—my poor child!" said Mrs. Eastwood. "Oh, Innocent, why did I let you go from me? Speak, dear, tell me what it is? Innocent, speak!"

"Do not be angry," said poor Innocent, raising her piteous face, with a child's utter abandonment and dependence upon the one standard of good and evil which alone it understands. And yet the face was more woeful, more distraught, than child's face could be. Mrs. Eastwood, anxious yet reassured, concluded that the poor girl, weary and frightened of strangers, had run away from the High Lodge to come home, an offence which might well seem terrible to Innocent. What could it be else? She bent over her and kissed her, and tried to draw her into her arms.

"My poor child, how you are trembling. I am not angry, Innocent; why are you so frightened? Sit down and rest, and let me get up, and then you can tell me. Come, dear, come; it cannot be anything so very bad," said Mrs. Eastwood with a smile, endeavouring to disengage her arm from Innocent's hold.

But the girl's fixed gaze, and her desperate clasp did not relax. Her white face was set and rigid. "Do not be angry!" she said again, with a voice of woe strangely at variance with the simple entreaty; and while Mrs. Eastwood waited expecting to hear some simple confession, such as that Innocent had been frightened by the strange faces, or weary of the monotonous life, and had run away—there suddenly fell upon her horrified ears words which stunned her, and seemed to make life itself stand still. They came slow, with little pauses between, accompanied by a piteous gaze which watched every movement of the listener's face, and with a convulsive pressure of the arm which Innocent held to her bosom.

"I have killed Frederick's wife," she said.

"What does she say? She must be mad!" cried Mrs. Eastwood. The housemaid had followed Innocent into the room with officious anxiety, carrying the cup of tea, which was a means of satisfying her curiosity as to this strange and sudden arrival. Just as these

terrible words were said she appeared at the foot of the bed, holding the tray in her hand.

"No," said Innocent, seeing nothing but her aunt's face; "no, I am not mad. It was last night. I came home somehow, I scarcely know how—it was last night."

"And, Innocent, Innocent—you——?"

"Oh, do not be angry!" cried Innocent, hiding her piteous face upon her aunt's breast. The woe, the horror, the distracting sense of sudden misery seemed to pass from the one to the other in that rapid moment. But the mother thus suddenly roused had to think of everything. "Put down the tray," she said quickly to the staring intruder at the foot of the bed, "call Alice to me, get Miss Innocent's room ready, and send some one for the doctor. She is ill—quick, go and call Alice, there is not a moment to lose. Innocent," she whispered in her ear as the woman went away, "Innocent, for God's sake look at me! Do you know what you are saying? Innocent! Frederick's wife?"

Innocent raised herself up with a long-drawn sigh. Her face relaxed; she had put off her burden. "It was last night," she repeated, "we were alone; I did not want to go, but they made me. She was angry—very angry—and then—oh! She opened her eyes and looked at me, and was still—still.—Till they came I did not know what it was."

"And it was——? For God's sake, Innocent, try to understand what you are saying. Did she die—when you were with her? You are not dreaming? But, Innocent, *you* had nothing to do with it, my poor, poor child?"

Once more Innocent unfolded the fingers which she had clenched fast upon something. She held out a small phial, with some drops of dark liquid still in it. "It was this," she said, looking at it with a strange, vacant gaze.

And then a horrible conviction came to poor Mrs. Eastwood's mind. Out of the depths of her heart there came a low but terrible cry. Many things she had been called upon to bear in her cheerful life, as all stout hearts are—now was it to be swallowed up in tragic disgrace and horror at the end?

The cry brought Nelly, wondering and horror-stricken, from her innocent sleep, and old Alice, forecasting new trouble to the family, but nothing so horrible, nothing so miserable as this.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BEREAVED HUSBAND.

I WILL not attempt to describe the state of the house out of which Innocent had fled—the dismal excitement of all the attendants, the sudden turning of night into day, the whole household called up to help where no help was possible, and the miserable haste with which the two men, of whose lives Amanda was the centre and chief influence, came to the room in which she lay beyond their reach. Batty, roused from his sleep, stupid with the sudden summons and with the habitual brandy and water which had preceded it, stumbled into the room, distraught but incapable of understanding what had befallen him; while Frederick, stunned by the sudden shock, came in from the room where he had been dozing over a novel, and pretending to write letters, scarcely more capable of realizing the event which had taken place in his life than was his father-in-law. It was only when the doctor came, that any one of the party actually believed in the death which had thus come like a thief in the night. After he had made his dismal examination, he told them that the sad event was what he had always expected and foretold. "I have warned you again and again, Mr. Batty," he said, "that in your daughter's state of health any sudden excitement might carry her off in a moment." There was nothing extraordinary in the circumstances, so far as he knew, or any one. The often-repeated passion had recurred once too often, and the long-foreseen end had come unawares, as everybody had known it would come. That was all. There was no reason for doubt or inquiry, much less suspicion. The glass which had fallen from the dead hand had been taken away, the black stain on the coverlit concealed by a shawl, which aunty in natural tidiness had thrown over it. Poor Batty, hoarsely sobbing, calling upon his child, was led back to his room, and with more brandy and water was made to go to bed, and soon slept heavily, forgetting for an hour or two what had befallen him. With Frederick the effect was different. He could not rest, nor seek to forget in sleep the sudden change which had come upon his life. He went out into the garden, in the broad, unchanged moonlight, out of sight of all the dismal bustle, the arrangements of the death-chamber, the last cares which poor aunty, weeping, was giving to the dead. The dead! Was that his wife? Amanda! She whom he had wooed and worshipped; who had given him rapture, misery, disgust, all mingled together; who had been the one prize he had won in his life, and the one great blight which had fallen upon that life? Was it she who was now called by that *dismal title?* who lay there now, rigid and silent, taking no note of *what was done about* her, finding no fault? Frederick stood in the

moonlight, and looked up at her window with a sense of unreality, impossibility, which could not be put into words; but a few hours before he had been there, with his little cousin, glad to escape from the surroundings he hated, from Batty's odious companionship, from Amanda's termagant fits. He had felt it a halcyon moment, a little gentle oasis which refreshed him in the midst of the desert which by his own folly his life had become. And now—good heavens! was it true?—in a moment this desert was past, the consequences of his folly over, his life his own again to do something better with it. The world and the garden, and the broad lines of the moonlight, seemed to turn round with him as he stood and gazed at the house and tried to understand what had come upon him.

It may be thought strange that this should have been the first sensation which roused him out of the dull and stupefying pain of the shock he had just received. Frederick was not a man of high mould to begin with, but he was proud and sensitive to all that went against his self-love, his sense of importance, his consciousness of personal and family superiority—and he had the tastes of an educated man, and clung to the graces and refinements of life, except at those moments which no one knew of, when he preferred pleasure, so-called, to everything, moments of indulgence which had nothing to do with his revealed and visible existence. He had been wounded in the very points at which he was most susceptible, by Amanda and her belongings. She, herself, had been an offence to him even in the first moments of his passion, and, as his passion waned and disappeared altogether, what had he not been compelled to bear? He had brought it upon himself, he was aware, and he had believed that he would have to bear it all his life, or most of his life. And now, in a moment, he was free! But Frederick was not unnatural in exultation over his deliverance. The shock of seeing her lying dead upon that bed, the strange, pitiful, remorseful sense, which every nature not wholly deadened feels at sight of that sudden blow which has spared him and struck another—that sudden deprivation of the "sweet light," the air, the movement of existence which we still enjoy, but which the other has lost—affected him with that subduing solemnity of feeling which often does duty for grief. How could any imagination follow Amanda into the realms of spiritual existence? Her life had been all physical—of the flesh, not of the spirit; there had been nothing about her which could lead even her lover, in the days when he was her lover, to think of her otherwise than as a beautiful development of physical life, a creature all made of lovely flesh and blood, with fascinations which began and ended in satiny gloss and dazzling colour, in roundness and brightness, and softness and warmth. What could he think of her now? She had gone, and had left behind all the qualities by which he knew her. Her voice was silent,

that one gift she possessed by which she could call forth any emotion that was not of the senses; with it she could rouse a man to fierce rage, to wild impatience, to hatred and murderous impulses; but that was silent, and her beauty was turned into marble, a solemn thing that chilled and froze the beholder. What else was there of her that her husband could think of, could follow with his thoughts? Her soul—what was it? Frederick had never cared to know. He had never perceived its presence in any secret moment. But he was not impious, nor a speculatist of any kind; he indulged in no questions which the most orthodox theologian could have thought dangerous. He tried even to think piously of his Amanda as passed into another, he hoped a better, world; but he stood bewildered and saddened on that threshold, not knowing how to shape these thoughts, nor what to make of the possibility of spiritual non-bodily existence for her. He could not follow her in idea to any judgment, to any heaven. He stood dully sad before the dim portals within which she had passed, with a heavy aching in his heart, a blank and wondering sense of something broken off. He was not without feeling; he could not have gone to bed and slept stupefied as did the father, who had lost the only thing he loved. A natural awe, a natural pang, were in Frederick's mind; he felt the life run so warm in his own veins, and she was dead and ended. Poor Amanda! he was more sorry for her than he was for himself. The anguish of love is more selfish; it is its own personal loss, the misery of the void in which it has to live alone, which wrings its heart. But Frederick, for once, felt little for himself. To himself the change was not heart-breaking; he was free from much that had threatened to make his life a failure; but for once his mind departed from selfish considerations. He was sorry for her. Poor Amanda! who had lost all she cared for, all she knew.

This is not a bitter kind of grief, but so far as it went it was a true feeling. He had more sympathy with his wife in that moment than he had had throughout all their life together. Poor Amanda! it might be that he had gained, but she had lost. I need not say what a different, far different, sentiment this was, from that which feels with an ineffable elevation of anguish that she, who is gone, has gained everything, and that it is the survivor whose loss is unspeakable, irremediable. Frederick's loss was not irremediable. But he was sorry, very sorry for *her;* the tears came into his eyes as he thought of the grave, and the silence, for Amanda. Poor Amanda! so fond of sound, and bustle, and motion; so confident in her own beauty; so bent upon gratification—all taken away from her at a stroke. He looked up at her window through his tears; the flickering lights had been put out, the movement stilled; *no more shadows* flitted across the white blinds; the windows *were open, the place* was quiet, one small taper left burning—the

room given over to the silence of death. And all this in a few hours! It was then the middle of the night, three or four o'clock; he had been wandering there a long time, full of many thoughts. When he saw that all was still, he went back softly to the house. He had nowhere to go to but the little parlour in which he had been writing, where he threw himself on the sofa to get a few hours' rest; and then it suddenly occurred to him to think of Innocent. Where was she? how had she disappeared out of that scene of consternation and distress? Frederick was cold and weary; he had wrapped a railway rug round him, and he could not now disturb himself and the house to inquire after his cousin. She must have gone to bed before it happened, he said to himself. He had not seen her, or heard her referred to, and doubtless it had been thought unnecessary to call her when the others were called. No doubt she was safe in bed, unconscious of all that had happened, and he would see her next morning. Thus Frederick assured himself ere he fell into a dreary comfortless doze on the sofa. Nothing could have happened to Innocent; she was safe and asleep, no doubt, poor child, slumbering unconsciously through all these sorrows.

It was not till late next morning that he found out how it really was. Neither aunty nor any one else entertained the slightest suspicion that Innocent had anything to do with Mrs. Frederick's death. She had disappeared, and no one thought of her in the excitement of the moment. The very maid who had seen her leave the house had not identified the figure which had appeared and disappeared so suddenly in the moonlight. She thought first it was a ghost, and then that it was some one who had been passing and had been tempted to look in at the open door. In the spent excitement of the closed-up house next day—it was Sunday, most terrible of all days in the house of death—when the household, shut up, in the first darkness, had to realise the great change that had happened, and the two men, who had been arbitrarily drawn together by Amanda, were thrown upon each other for society in the darkened rooms, at the melancholy meals, with now no bond whatever between them—Frederick asked, with a kind of longing for his cousin. "Is Miss Vane still in her room? Is she ill?" he asked of the maid who attended at the luncheon which poor Batty swallowed by habit, moaning between every mouthful.

"Miss Vane, sir? oh, the young lady. She went away last night, when—when it happened," answered the maid.

"Went away last night? Where has she gone?" cried Frederick, in dismay.

"That none on us knows. She went straight away out of the house, sir, the next moment after—it happened," said the maid.

"She was frightened, I suppose, poor young lady. She took the way to the Minster, up the street. It was me that saw her. I

didn't say nothing till this morning, for I thought it was a ghost."

"A ghost! My poor Innocent!" said Frederick. "Did she say nothing? Good heavens! where can the poor child have gone?"

He started up in real distress, and got his hat.

"Stay where you are," said Batty. "You are not going out of my house this day, and my girl lying dead. My girl!—my pretty 'Manda!—none of them were fit to tie her shoes. Oh Lord, oh Lord! to think an old hulk like me should last and my girl be gone! You don't go a step out of my house, mind you, Eastwood—not a step—to show how little you cared for my girl, if I have to hold you with my hands."

"I have no desire to show anything but the fullest respect for Amanda," said Frederick; "poor girl, she shall have no slight from me; but I must look after my little cousin. Miss Vane trusted her to me. My mother will be anxious——"

"D—— Miss Vane," said poor Batty, "d—— every one that comes in the way of what's owed to my poor girl, my pretty darling. Oh, my 'Manda, my 'Manda! How shall I live when she's gone? Look you here, Frederick Eastwood, I know most of your goings on. I know about that cousin. You shan't step out of here, not to go after another woman, and the breath scarce out of my poor girl."

"I must know where Innocent has gone," cried Frederick, chafing at this restriction, yet moved by so much natural emotion as to hesitate before wounding the feelings of Amanda's father. "I have little wish to go out, Heaven knows; but the poor child——"

"I will find out about the child," said Batty; and Frederick did not escape till the night had come again, and he could steal out in the darkness to supplement the information which Batty's groom managed to collect. Innocent had been seen by various people in her flight. She had been watched to the shadow of the Minster, and then to the railway, where nobody had seen her go into the train, but which was certainly the last spot where she had been. Frederick was discomposed by this incident, more perhaps than became a man whose wife had died the day before. He could not leave the house in which Amanda lay dead to follow Innocent; but in his mind he thought a great deal more of her than of his wife on the second night of his bereavement. Where was she—poor, innocent, simple-hearted child? He sent a messenger to the High Lodge, hoping she might be there. He felt himself responsible for her to his mother, to Miss Vane, to all who knew him. As it was Sunday, however, he had no means—either by post or telegraph—to communicate with his mother. He had to wait till morning, with burning impatience in his mind. Poor Innocent! how his heart warmed to the little harmless, tender thing, who had nestled to him like a

child, who had always trusted him, clung to him, believed in him. Nothing had ever shaken her faith. Even his marriage, which had detached many of his friends from him, had not detached her. She had believed in him whatever happened. I have said that Frederick had always been kind to Innocent. It had not indeed always been from the most elevated of motives; her supposed love for him had pleased his vanity, and he had indulged himself by accepting her devotion without any thought of those consequences to her which his mother feared; he had, indeed, believed as firmly as his mother and her maids did, that Innocent was "in love" with him—and instead of honourably endeavouring to make an end of that supposititious and most foolish passion he had "encouraged" Innocent, and solaced himself by her childish love. But through all this vanity and self-complacency there had been a thread of natural affection, which was perhaps the very best thing in Frederick, during that feverish period of his life which had now suddenly come to an end. He had always been "fond of" his little cousin. Now this tender natural affection came uppermost in his mind. Real anxiety possessed him—painful questionings and suspicions. Where had she fled to in her terror? She was not like other people, understanding how to manage for herself, to tell her story, and make her own arrangements. And then there was the strange alarming fact, that though she had been seen to enter the railway station she had not gone away, so the officials swore, by any train, and yet had disappeared utterly, leaving no trace. It seemed natural enough to Frederick that she should have fled in terror at thus finding herself face to face with death. Neither aunty nor the maids had as yet sufficiently shaped their recollections to give a very clear idea as to the moment at which poor Amanda died, and no one knew how deeply Innocent was involved in that terrible moment. But yet no one wondered that she had "run away," partly because the excitement of the great event itself still possessed the house, and partly because the girl's abstracted visionary look impressed upon all vulgar spectators a belief that "she was not all there," as the maids said. She was supposed to be a little "weak," even at the High Lodge, where her piety had procured for her a kind of worship. That she should be driven wild by fright and should fly out of the house seemed no wonder to any one. Frederick lay awake all night thinking of her; he could not turn his thoughts to any other subject. How soon the mind gets accustomed to either gain or loss when it is final! Twenty-four hours before, his brain had been giddy with the awful thought that Amanda was dead, that the bonds of his life were broken, and that she who had been his closest companion, the woman he had loved and loathed, had suddenly and mysteriously departed from him, without notice or warning, into the unseen. The shock of this sudden interruption to his life had for the moment disturbed the balance of earth and

heaven; in that terrible region of mystery between the seen and the unseen, between life and death, he had stood tottering, wondering, bewildered—for a moment. Now, after twenty-four hours, Amanda's death was an old, well-known tale, a thing that had been for ages; it was herself who began to look like a shadow, a dream. Had she really been his wife, his fate, the centre of his life, colouring it wholly, and turning it to channels other than those of nature? Already this began to seem half incredible to Frederick—already he felt that his presence in Batty's house was unnatural; that he was a stranger altogether detached from it and its disagreeable associations, waiting only for a point of duty, free from it henceforward for ever. He was there "on business" only, as any other stranger might be. And his whole mind was now occupied by the newer, more hopeful mystery, the fate of his cousin. Poor little Innocent! how sweet she had always been to him, how soothing in her truth and faith. Perhaps in the halcyon time to come, free of all the bonds which his folly had woven round him, might he not reward Innocent for her love? If he could only be sure she was safe—if he but knew where she was!

Early on the Monday morning he rushed to the telegraph-office to communicate with his mother, and ascertain if she had gone home. How he chafed at his bondage here, and that he could not go to satisfy himself, to secure the poor child's safety! No one, however, who saw Frederick with his melancholy aspect passing along the street, had any suspicion that Amanda's memory was treated with less "respect" than that of the most exemplary of wives. The village was full of the sad story, and people looked at him curiously as he passed. Poor fellow, how he seemed to feel it! and no doubt she was very pretty, and men thought so much of beauty. Frederick's solemn aspect gained him the sympathy of all the villagers. They spoke more tenderly of Batty's daughter when they saw the bereaved husband. No doubt it had been a love match on his side at least, and whatever her faults might have been it was dreadful to be taken so young and so sudden! Thus Sterborne murmured sympathetically as Frederick went to send off his telegram, with very little thought of his wife, and a burning impatience to escape from all her belongings, in his heart.

He went to the railway before he went back, to ask if any further information about Innocent had been obtained. The early train from town had just arrived, and to his astonishment he was met by his mother, looking very pale, anxious, and almost frightened, if that could be. "Mother, this is kind," he cried, rushing up to her, touched for the moment by a sudden sense of the faithful affection that never failed him; and then he added hurriedly, "Innocent! is she with you? do you know where she is?"

"*She is safe* at home," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a heavy *sigh.*

"Thank God!" he cried; and it did not occur to him that his mother did not share his thankfulness, and that the cloud on her face was more heavy than any he had before seen there through all her troubles.

CHAPTER XXXV

MRS. EASTWOOD'S INVESTIGATION.

"I FEEL for you very deeply," said Mrs. Eastwood. "It is a terrible calamity. Your child, whom you hoped would close your eyes, whom you never thought to see taken before you——"

"She was the apple of my eye," said poor Batty, sobbing. Except when he stupefied himself with drink, or rushed into his business, and swore and raged at every one round him, which were the only ways he had of seeking a momentary forgetfulness, the man, coarse and sensual as he was, was tragic in his grief. "There was never one like her, at least to me. I do not say but she might have been faulty to others; but to her old father she was everything. I thank you from my heart for this respect. You mightn't be fond of my girl, while she lived. I ask no questions. It was because you didn't know her—how could you?—like I knew her, that have nursed her, and have doted on her from a baby; but thank you all the same for the respect. It would have gone to her heart—my poor 'Manda! Oh, ma'am, the beauty that girl was! I never saw anything to come nigh to her. Her temper was quick, always hasty, ready with a word or a blow—but always the first to come round and forgive those that had crossed her. My life's over, my heart's broken. I don't care for nothing, horses nor houses, nor my garden, nor my bit of money—nothing, now she's gone."

"Indeed, I feel for you very deeply," said Mrs. Eastwood, "and at her age, so young, it is doubly hard—and so unexpected."

She recurred to this with a reiteration which was unlike her usual sympathetic understanding of others. There was an eager anxiety in her eyes when she suggested that Amanda's death was unlooked for. Frederick sat by with a countenance composed to the woe of the occasion, and strangely impressed by the profound feeling in his mother's face, watched her anxiously, but could not understand. What did she mean? Was she really so grieved for Amanda? Had the shock and pain of so sudden an ending really produced this profound effect upon her? or was she so conscious of the advantage which Amanda's death would bring with it, that natural compunction made her exaggerate her expressions of sympathy? Frederick

could not tell, but he watched his mother, wondering. There were circles of weariness and care round her eyes, and signs of suppressed and painful anxiety, and an eager watchfulness, which was incomprehensible to him, were visible in her whole aspect. She even breathed quickly, as with a feverish excitement, all the more painful that it was suppressed.

"I thought you were aware, mother," he said, "that poor Amanda had been threatened for years with this which has happened now in so terrible a way. The doctors have always said——"

"The doctors, confound 'em!" cried Batty. "I beg your pardon, ma'am, but it's hard for a man to keep his patience. They're ready enough to talk, but what can they do, these fellows? Keep her quiet, they told me. My God! didn't I do everything a man could do to keep her quiet, gave her all she wanted, never crossed her, let her have her way in everything! There is nothing I wouldn't have done for my girl. She'd have had gold to eat and drink if that would have done it. I'd have took her anywhere, got her anything. But no. Ask 'em, and they tell you all that is unpleasant, but give you a way to mend it—no. They do it, I sometimes think, to make their own words come true. 'She'll go off one day, all in a moment,' they said to me, years and years ago. Says I, 'I'll give you half I've got, all I've got, if you will make it so as this shan't be.' Trust them for that. They gave her physic and stuff, and shook their wise heads, and said she was to be kept quiet. What had keeping quiet to do with it? We've all quick tempers. I never could master mine myself, and how was she to be expected to master hers? From father to son and from mother to daughter, the Battys were always a word and a blow. I'd rather that a deal than your slow, quiet, sullen ones, that hides their feelings. No, you may say it was unexpected, for how was I to believe them? A bit of a flare-up never did me no harm. I never believed them. But now here's their d——d artfulness—it's come true."

"And she knew it herself?" said Mrs. Eastwood, with searching, anxious gaze. "Oh, Mr. Batty, try and take a little comfort! It must have made her think more seriously than you suppose, if she knew it herself."

Batty gave her a dull look of wonder from his tearful blood-shot eyes; and then he launched forth again into panegyrics upon his lost child. "She was none of your quiet, sullen ones—still water as runs deep. She said what she thought, did my 'Manda. She might be too frank and too open to please them as hide their thoughts, but she always pleased her father. There's aunty, now, that was constantly with my girl, will tell you 'Manda was always the one to make it up; whatever was done or said, she was the one to make it up. She spoke her mind free, but it was over directly. You should *have seen her* when she was a bit of a girl; she'd ride anything you *put her upon—till the* doctors said it was bad for her. When she

was a baby I used to grumble and wish for a boy; but I'd never have been as proud of a boy as I was of my beauty, when I saw what she was coming to. From fifteen there never was a man as saw her that wasn't mad about her. Your son, here, ma'am, Fred, as she always called him, poor girl, was the one that had the luck to please her; I don't know why, for many is the handsome fellow, titles and all that, I've had to send away. I've nothing to say against Fred, but she might have done a deal better. And now she's gone, where there's neither marrying nor giving in marriage. You are sorry for Fred, of course it's but natural; but it isn't half to Fred that it is to me. Give us your hand, my boy; I always look upon you as my son, for her sake—but it isn't half the blow to you as it is to me."

Frederick had started to his feet when he had heard himself first spoken of in this familiar fashion. The familiarity chafed him almost beyond endurance. He stood at the window, with his back towards his father-in-law, as Batty wept and maundered. Fiery rage was in Frederick's mind. What had this man, this fellow, to do with him? a man with whom he had no relationship, no bond of connexion? He took no notice of the outstretched hand. When would those slow hours pass, and the time be over during which decency compelled him to endure his odious presence? What would he not give when it was all ended, when this horrible chapter in his life should be closed, and he himself restored to his natural sphere among his equals, restoring to his mother all the comforts which Amanda's existence had diminished, and taking once more his natural place. How he longed suddenly, all at once, for his old home! He would never go back to the house which had been Amanda's; he would sell everything, disperse everything that could remind him of this episode which, God be thanked, was over. Batty, though he stretched out his hand in maudlin affectionateness, was satisfied that Frederick had not observed the gesture, and did not resent the absence of response. But Frederick had seen and loathed the offered touch. The days that must pass perforce before he could finally cut the last lingering ties which decency required him to respect seemed to him an age.

"I should like to see the—the—excellent person who attended upon poor Amanda," said Mrs. Eastwood, whose looks were still watchful and anxious, though a certain relief had stolen over her face. "Might I speak to her and thank her for her devotion—to my daughter-in-law?" she added, almost rousing Frederick from his own preoccupied condition by the astounding interest and sympathy she showed. What could she mean by it? When Batty, pleased by the request, went himself to call aunty, Frederick turned to his mother with something of his old peremptory and authoritative ways.

"You did not always seem so fond of your daughter-in-law," he said.

"Oh, Frederick!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, with a depth of feeling which surprised him more and more. "I never wished her any harm. God forbid that I should have wished her any harm!"

"Has any one ever supposed you did?" he cried, with some impatience.

His mother put her handkerchief to her eyes. "God knows I am sorry—sorry to the bottom of my heart," she said, "for her, and for the poor man who has lost his child. Whatever she was to us, she was his child to him. But, Frederick, I am not quite disinterested in my motives, God forgive me; it is for Innocent's sake."

"Are you out of your senses, mother? For Innocent's sake?"

"Oh, hush, my dear! that I may ascertain the circumstances exactly, and how much is known. Oh, hush! Frederick, here they are. Don't say a word more."

He had to conceal his bewilderment, which was beyond describing, as aunty, in a black gown and with her handkerchief rolled up tight into a ball in her hand, came into the room. When he heard his mother speak to this woman in soft caressing tones, and beg to hear an account of everything, every incident and detail—it seemed to Frederick that his understanding of the meaning of words must be deserting him. "Tell me everything; it is all of the deepest interest to me, and there is a mournful satisfaction in knowing the details," said poor Mrs. Eastwood, putting forth the conventional words with an uncomfortable sense of her son's criticism, and his doubt of her sincerity. But Batty had no doubt. He was flattered by Mrs. Eastwood's anxiety, by her desire to know all. "I ain't equal to it myself," he said, "but she will tell you," and withdrew to a corner, to listen and sob, and moan over his child's name. Mrs. Eastwood could not see his grief without becoming sympathetic. As for Frederick, he had heard the particulars often enough, and had no wish to hear them again. He was surprised and half offended by his mother's strange mission. For Innocent's sake! Were the women all mad together, one madder than the other? or what did she, what could she mean? He went out into the garden, his only refuge during these days when decorum forbade him to be seen; there he lighted a cigar, and with his hands in his pockets strolled about the paths. His mind turned to Innocent, and he thought to himself how pleasant it would have been to have had her there now, holding his arm with her delicate hand, hanging upon him, looking up in his face. He took almost a fit of longing for Innocent. But what folly about her could his mother have got into her head? what did she mean?

Mrs. Eastwood had a long interview with aunty. She heard everything about Amanda's illness; how aunty had thought badly of her from the first, seeing her strength give way; how her ex*citableness,* poor dear, grew greater and greater, so that not a day *passed without* one or two outbreaks; how she took a fancy to "the

young lady," saying she'd have her to sit with her, and not her ordinary nurse; how there had been a long silence when Innocent went to the room, while she was reading; how, after this, aunty had heard Amanda's voice in high excitement, talking loud and fast; how there had come a sudden stillness, a stillness so great that it waked poor aunty from her doze; how she had rushed to the rooms and found her patient in a faint, as she at first thought, with "the poor young lady" standing over her. "The poor child ran off from us in the midst of our bustle," said aunty, "and I don't wonder; she was frightened, and I hope no harm happened to her, poor thing. She was young to see death, and a nice young lady. I hope she came to no harm?"

"Oh no—except the shock to her nerves," said Mrs. Eastwood. "She came straight home. It was the best thing she could do."

"The very best thing," assented aunty. "And if you'll believe me, ma'am, what with the bustle, and grieving so, and my mind being full of one thing, I never even thought of the poor young lady till to-day. I'm thankful to hear she's all safe, and not another house plunged into trouble like we are. I was saying an hour since, my heart was sore for her, poor young thing, her first being from home, as far as I understood, and to come into a house of such sore trouble, and to see death without notice or warning. It was hard upon such a child."

"Yes, it was very hard," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I left her ill in bed, her nerves shattered to pieces. And what a shock, what a night for you——"

"Oh, ma'am, you may say that," cried aunty, with tears. "I've nursed her from a baby, and nobody could care for her like me, except her poor father, as worshipped the ground she trod on. She's as beautiful as an angel," said the faithful woman; "never all her life, when she was at her best, did I see her like what she is now. Oh, ma'am, you've a feeling heart, besides being Mrs. Frederick's mother, and a relation like the rest of us. You'll come up-stairs and look at her, poor dear."

And Mrs. Eastwood was taken up-stairs, and what with infinite pity, what with unspeakable relief and ease of mind, cried so over Amanda's deathly beauty, that Batty and his humble sister-in-law were flattered and comforted beyond expression. She was a real lady, they both said—no pride like the other Eastwoods, or the rest of that sort, but with a feeling heart, and showing such respect as was Amanda's due. She made a conquest of both, and the household put itself at her feet when, with red eyes and a voice tremulous with emotion, she came down-stairs. She was just in time to receive Miss Vane, who, driving from the High Lodge in fulfilment of her promise to reclaim Innocent and pay a visit of ceremony to Mrs. Frederick, discovered to her consternation what had happened, and

was anxiously questioning the servants about Innocent when Mrs. Eastwood came down-stairs.

"Went away in the middle of the night?" said Miss Vane. "Pardon me for speaking out. What a very strange thing to do?"

"She is a strange girl," said Mrs. Eastwood. "She was shocked and frightened beyond measure. The only thought in her mind was to get home."

"It was very odd all the same, very odd, in the middle of the night, and when she might have been of use. I must write to my brother Reginald, and let him know she has left me. He will be surprised. I am glad she is safe in your hands," said Miss Vane pointedly; "a girl that does such things is dangerous to have about one."

"Indeed, you mistake poor Innocent," said Mrs. Eastwood. "She is not like other girls——"

"Ah, that is evident," said Miss Vane. "I liked her too; there were many things in her that I liked; but a girl that acts so on impulse—I ought, however, to condole with you, Mrs. Eastwood. How very sad for—your son."

"It is a great shock," said Mrs. Eastwood. She was so much excited and agitated, that on the smallest inducement she was ready to cry again.

Miss Vane regarded Frederick's mother with eyes of somewhat severe criticism. No doubt a certain decorum was necessary; but for the relations of a man who had made so unfortunate a marriage to pretend to grieve over the death of the objectionable wife seemed to her absolute duplicity. She eyed poor Mrs. Eastwood severely, making mental commentaries upon her red eyes, which were very little to her favour. "I had never the advantage of seeing Mrs. Frederick Eastwood," she said, drily. "She was very handsome, I have always heard."

Then there was a pause; neither of the ladies knew what to say to each other. That she should be found here, doing as it were the honours of Batty's house, was not a position pleasant to Mrs. Eastwood, and she realized it for the first time now when her mind was relieved in respect to Innocent. But what could she say? She could not explain her horror of fear, her painful mission, to this representative of Innocent's family, who already looked suspicious and disapproving both at herself and at the strange conduct of the poor girl whom no one understood. When the pause had lasted so long that it was necessary to break it, she said hurriedly, "If poor Innocent had not been so much startled and shocked—so overcome, in short, by what happened before her eyes—I am sure she would have asked me to explain to you. But she is so young, and had never seen death before, and such a sensitive, imaginative——"

"*Do you think* she is imaginative? She looks it certainly—but I *found her* matter-of-fact," said Miss Vane, determined to give no

countenance to these wild proceedings. Mrs. Eastwood was thus driven upon another tack.

"I am going back this afternoon," she said, "her story was so incoherent, poor child; and I feared for the effect the shock might have—upon my son."

"Is he imaginative too?" asked Miss Vane.

"He is my boy," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a comforting flush of indignation and offence, "naturally my first thought was for him. I go back to my other poor child to-night."

"A most fatiguing journey for you, I am sure," said the visitor, and they took a stately leave of each other, with no very friendly feeling. Had the brother only been there instead of the sister! Mrs. Eastwood thought to herself. John Vane was the only person in the world to whom possibly she might have confided the terror she had gone through—who might have advised what was best to be done. Even to Frederick, Mrs. Eastwood reflected, she never could whisper the horrible delusion which had taken possession of Innocent's mind. For it could be nothing but delusion—yet how vivid, how powerful! Nelly knew of it, and Alice, who were safe as herself; and Mrs. Eastwood could not but recollect the other listener, whose commonplace imagination would never be satisfied by any certainty that the confession she had heard was the outburst of a mere delusion. The experience of life made her very well aware that nothing is ever long concealed which has been put into words in the hearing of an uninterested bystander; and should any emergency arise, what should she—what could she do? There was no one whom she dared trust—not Frederick, not Ernest Molyneux. The secret must be locked in their own bosoms; nothing could be done but to keep it a secret. Even John Vane—but on the thought of him alone her anxious mind reposed with a certain consolation—of all the world, he was the only one who might, perhaps, help them, should any terrible necessity for help ever come.

Miss Vane, on her part, went away shaking her head. "There is something in it all I don't understand," she said to the Sister, who awaited her in the pony carriage outside. "Innocent never concealed her dislike to Mrs. Frederick. Though she talked so little, she could talk on that subject."

"Poor child, she was so simple and sincere, she said what she thought," answered Sister Emily, whom Innocent's church-going ways had deeply impressed.

"Oh, sincere! well, I suppose you may call that sincerity," said Miss Vane; "but few people would like such sincerity in respect to themselves; and why with these feelings Innocent should have been so shocked, I can't imagine. Depend upon it, there is something more in the whole business than meets the eye. I shall write to my brother all about it to-day."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AT HOME.

THAT was a day never to be forgotten at The Elms. Innocent had been partially soothed during the long Sunday by the constant presence of her aunt and Nelly, and the careful tendance of old Alice. They never left her all day long. She was brought back at her own piteous request from the room she had chosen for herself to the little room within Nelly's, which had been first prepared for her, and there lay all day long, holding the hand of one or the other, in a state of prostration which it was painful to witness. So long as they were with her she was calm; but if left a moment alone, began to cry out about the eyes that were looking at her, the clutch on her arm. Sometimes she would doze and begin counting over and over again, counting "ten, eleven, fifteen," and would wake and start with looks of horror, gazing wildly around her, not knowing where she was. Mrs. Eastwood's expedition to Sterborne had been decided upon by the mother and daughter as they sat together whispering over the fire, when Innocent at last fell asleep. Only one of the two could go, and Mrs. Eastwood decided at once that hers must be the mission. "We must know what is hanging over us—we must ascertain what we have to expect," she had said. Oh, in what labyrinths of woe and horror did their innocent simple life seem about to lose itself! For neither of them doubted Innocent's story. They felt that nothing which she had imagined could have produced such an effect upon her, and besides, what could have suggested such a strange idea? Her imagination was not impressionable. The only explanation was that it must be true. Mrs. Eastwood accordingly, after her vigil, set off in the early morning with a heart overweighted with horrible anxiety, not knowing what might have happened before she returned, or what tumult she might meet when she got there. She was prepared to defend the unfortunate girl to the last gasp; but if this dreadful story were true, what could be done? To carry Innocent away at once out of the country, without an hour's delay, was a thought which had occurred both to Nelly and herself, but this might make doubt into certainty, and precipitate the very danger they feared. Thus she went away, trembling with anxious fears, with traces in her face of the agitation she could not conceal; yet, at the same time, horribly on her guard, watching everybody and everything, to draw the secret if possible from others, and to conceal her own possession of it. The two whom she left behind to guard Innocent were almost more to be pitied than she was. They felt *themselves the* garrison of the room, to defend it against possible *invasion. They* locked the door of Nelly's chamber, through which

any visitor must come, and then unlocked it again, fearing to awake suspicion. At every noise they started, and clung to each other, fearing nothing less than the horrible approach of justice to carry a prisoner away; and how many noises there were in the house that day! Carriages drove mysteriously to the door and drove away again, from the very moment about daybreak when Mrs. Eastwood left them, until the dreary afternoon which felt as if it would never be over. In that afternoon all the people left in London, everybody the Eastwoods knew, came to call, and had to be sent away with messages curiously worded to baffle suspicion, if any suspicion existed. The morning's post had brought a short note from Frederick announcing his wife's death, and the telegram of inquiry about Innocent which he had sent off on Monday morning closely followed the letter; therefore Nelly felt justified in drawing down all the blinds, and announcing that the death of her sister-in-law made it impossible for her to receive visitors. The maid who had heard Innocent's confession was the one who waited on them, who came with hard knocks at the door to tell of every new caller, and kept suspicious watch upon everything that passed. How frightened Nelly was of her! How eager to conciliate and turn her thoughts into other channels! But the woman was not to be moved into friendliness. She said nothing of her superior knowledge, but she betrayed a curiosity, and, at the same time, an amount of information which made the very blood run cold in Nelly's veins. She had not forgotten what she heard; she did not set it down to delusion; she believed what Innocent had said. To the vulgar intelligence it is always so comprehensible that evil should have been done. No questioning as to motive or likelihood takes place in that region; that all men are most likely to go wrong is the one fundamental principle of their belief; they make no distinction between the kinds of crime, that this is more probable than the other. All they know is that guilt is always the most probable hypothesis, and that probably every accused person did what he was accused of, or worse, however unlikely the accusation might be.

And Innocent herself was restless and wretched; less stupefied, more living than on the previous day. She could not bear Nelly to leave her. She talked incessantly—she, whose habit it was never to talk at all, and her talk was all about the event which had made so tremendous an impression on her.

"Shall I always see her eyes?" she cried, holding Nelly fast. "She looked at me, and would not stop looking. Her eyes were terrible. She looked at me, yet she was dead. Oh, think! She was dead—and it was I who made her die——"

"Even if you did, oh, Innocent," cried Nelly, worn out with excitement; "you did not mean it—it was an accident. She did it herself—it was an accident—it was not you."

"But I wished her to die," said Innocent, lifting her pale face with

something of its. old steadfastness of expression from her pillow. "I wished her to die."

"But not like this—Innocent, you would not hurt any one, I know. I am sure you did not mean it. Oh, you must know you could not have meant it!" cried Nelly, and wept, leaning her head upon the bed. How she felt her loneliness in that terrible emergency! Her mother had left her, and there was no one else to stand by her; to none in the world dared she tell this tale. Oh, if Ernest had but been as he once was, as she had thought him to be; if she but dared to send for him as a girl might send for her affianced husband, and relieve herself of the burden which was too heavy for her to carry alone! How blessed, how happy must the women be who could do this, who could trust entirely in the love and faith of the men whom they had pledged their own faith to! But on the contrary, even while she realized so fully the happiness, the comfort of such confidence, Nelly's prayer was that Ernest might be kept away from her—that he might not come to see her wretc hedsuspense, or to spy into the terrible secret of the house. He did not love the house, though he had said he loved Nelly. The honour, the good name of the family, could never be trusted in his hands.

And so the lingering wretched day went on. I think Nelly was far more unhappy than Innocent was, though the girl's whole being was shaken, for Innocent had Nelly to transfer her trouble to; and Nelly, poor Nelly, had no one. She had to bear up alone, and to bear up her cousin too; and with sickening fear she looked forward to the moment when her mother should return, and either relieve or intensify the strange suffering into which they had been suddenly plunged. It was about seven o'clock when Mrs. Eastwood came back, their usual dinner-hour—and Nelly had not ventured to neglect the dinner or to seem careless about it, lest the servants should suspect. Happily they were alone in the house, for Jenny had gone to his college, and Dick had accompanied the young freshman to Oxford, to see him off, according to his own phraseology, on his University career. "Thank God, the boys are away!" had been Mrs. Eastwood's first exclamation; and Nelly had echoed it a hundred times during that terrible day. Thank God, they were out of the way altogether! Nelly ran down-stairs to meet her mother with an anxiety which was speechless and almost indescribable—feeling as if her own future, her own life, hung in the balance with Innocent's. Mrs. Eastwood was giddy, and worn out with fatigue. She stumbled out of the cab into her daughter's arms. There were lights in the little hall, and the housemaid stood about waiting to receive Mrs. Eastwood's bag—the housemaid who had received Innocent—the one person in the house who shared their knowledge. Mrs. Eastwood was very pale, but the aspect of her countenance had changed.

"*Oh, Nelly,* let us thank God!" she said.

"*Then it was all* fancy—all delusion—it is not true!"

Nelly sank down upon a chair, feeling her limbs unable to sustain her. She had kept up till then—though for her too (she felt) it would have been death as well as Innocent. Now her head swam, her strength failed; she could scarcely see with her dim eyes her mother's exhausted face.

"It is simple delusion," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I cannot find even any foundation that she could have built such a fancy on—except that she was alone with—with poor Amanda, when the last paroxysm came on. Nelly, my darling, how pale you are! it has been too much for you——"

"You are pale too, mamma——"

"Yes, with fatigue—and relief—and thankfulness. Oh, Nelly, it seems wicked to be thankful when I think of that poor man who has lost his child."

"Mr. Batty?" said Nelly, with a perceptible failure of interest. The introduction of a stranger into the conversation brought her back to ordinary life.

"My dear, she was his child," said her mother, with gentle reproach.

"But you have made quite sure, perfectly sure?"

"I have seen everybody. Her nurse, her doctor, her father, even the maids—there is nothing in it—nothing. It must have been fright, imagination, nothing more."

"Thank God!"

This conversation was quite spontaneous and natural; but it would not, I think, have taken place in the hall but for Jane's presence, whom it was necessary to convince as well as themselves. But for this the mother and daughter would have concealed both their anxiety and their consolatory news till they were alone. And Jane, can it be doubted, knew this, and felt in the superiority of her unconscious cynicism and disbelief in human nature that the whole scene was got up for her benefit, and was a piece of acting. "As if I was to be taken in so easy," she said to herself; "as if they could come over me like that!"

Innocent lay with her eyes fixed upon the door, longing and waiting for her kind nurses. It was old Alice who sat by her in the interval, holding her head, smoothing the wild locks from her forehead. "My poor lamb!" said Alice. The old woman's heart was wrung with pity. I do not think she had ever believed Innocent's story fully. Neither did she believe fully the vindication which Mrs. Eastwood was bringing. She held the poor child's hand, and looked at her with soft pitying eyes. "My poor lamb!" To Alice, Innocent had always been a creature astray in the world; she did not wonder, like the rest, at this fatal complication in which her heedless feet had been caught. "I aye felt there was something coming," Alice had said, and her calm had been a support to them all in their excitement. Now she stood aside, and gave up

her place to her mistress with far less anxiety than Nelly had shown; but kept behind, listening and watching the one person in the world whom all three could rely upon for life or death. Mrs. Eastwood, weeping and smiling together, came forward, and threw herself on her knees by Innocent's bed. She kissed her again and again with many sobs. "Put it all away out of your mind," she cried, "my poor darling, my dear child! Put it all out of your mind. You are as innocent as your name; you had nothing, nothing to do with it. Do you understand me, Innocent? You had nothing to do with it. All you did was to be kind to her, good to her—not to bring her harm."

"Then she is not dead?" asked Innocent, with a cry of joy.

"She is dead; but you are not to blame. Oh, Innocent, try to understand, try to believe me; you are not to blame. She died of a disease she has had all her life, not of anything that she took."

"Ah! I gave it to her," said Innocent, dropping back upon her pillows with sad conviction. "I was there, I know; you and the others could not see how it was. I gave it to her, and I know."

"But, Innocent! listen to me. I have seen every one—the doctor, who must know best. And he told me exactly how it was, and what it was. He told me that he had looked for it for years—that he had always warned Mr. Batty how it must be. Innocent, you are not listening, you are paying no attention to what I say."

"For I was there," said Innocent. "Oh, do not be angry. I tried to count right; twice I threw it away because there was too much; the third time—oh, how can any one know but me? There was nobody else there—she in the bed, and I standing looking at her. And then all at once she was still—still like marble, and opened her eyes wide, and looked at me. She knew I did it, and I know. Except us two, who can tell in all the world? Oh, if you would be kind and kill me too!"

"Innocent! Innocent! It is her reason that has gone," said Mrs. Eastwood, with tears. She stood before the unreasoning creature in all the impotence of fact against conviction. Nothing she could say or do would change the girl's certainty; and yet she knew that this to which everybody bore witness, and not poor Innocent's fatal fancy, must be the truth.

"Leave her to me, mem," said old Alice. "She'll be quiet now, and maybe sleep. She believes it; but the first effect is wearing off. Go and get your mamma some food and some wine, Miss Nelly, and make her lie down and rest. Leave this poor lamb to me, the first effect is wearing off."

"But, Alice, there is no truth in it, not a word of truth——"

"*I wouldna* take it in that way," said Alice; "there's aye some

truth. Poor lamb, there has been something for her mind to fix upon. I'm no the one to say what it was—an evil thought, or maybe just a shaking of the hand, two or three drops too much, as she says, of the sleeping draught. But there's been something for her mind to fix on. It's no for nothing that the creature is shaken and laid low like this."

"It is a delusion," said Mrs. Eastwood.

But old Alice shook her head.

Alice's suspicion was very hard upon the ladies in their first burst of relief. It disturbed their conviction, their certainty.

"What Alice says is mere nonsense," Mrs. Eastwood said, as she went down-stairs. "It is as clear as daylight that poor dear Innocent has been frightened out of her senses. There is nothing at all mysterious about the death. It is delusion, nothing more; you think so, Nelly, too?"

"Of course I think so, mamma," said Nelly, with fervour. "I was always certain it must turn out so." But, nevertheless, there was a piteous quaver in both their voices which had not been there when they went joyous and confident to Innocent's room to set her mind at rest with their good news.

After they had eaten, for the first time almost since Sunday morning—a hurried cup of tea having been their chief support and sustenance in the interval—they sat together for half an hour over the fire with a hidden sense of misery in their hearts, though Mrs. Eastwood's detailed narrative of all that had befallen her, and Nelly's many comments and questions, the mutual support of two hearts which were as one, was not without its consolation. Before, however, this long and digressive talk was over Ernest Molyneux's well-known knock was heard at the door. He had a habit of coming in thus late after his evening engagements. Mrs. Eastwood started up suddenly.

"I am not equal to seeing any one to-night," she said. "You can tell Ernest I am tired; and Nelly—I don't bind you, dear, if it will be a comfort to you; but say no more than you can help——"

Thus the mother hurried away, leaving Nelly alone to meet her lover. After all the weariness and horrible suspense of the day, here was a reward for her—a moment of consolation, do you say, gentle reader? Molyneux came in from a dinner-party in evening dress, and with the air of society about him. He had looked in at his club, he had heard the news, he was full of the atmosphere of that conventional and limited sphere which is called the world; and he found Nelly in her morning gown, rising with a nervous shiver from the fire, her face pale, her eyes anxious, a creature trembling with the fulness of a life much different from that of clubs and dinner parties.

"Hallo, Nelly!" he said, looking at her with surprise and tact

disapproval. This sort of carelessness (he would have said) was inexcusable. It shocked his best feelings—a dowdy already before her marriage, idling over the fire in a morning dress; it might be a dressing gown next time, and in married life what would be expected from one who made such a beginning? All these commentaries were in the look he gave her, and the involuntary comparison he conveyed by a glance at himself in the mirror,—himself all gorgeously arranged in purple and fine linen, and with a flower in his coat,

"I have not dressed, it is true," she said hurriedly. "Innocent is ill, and I have been with her all day. You have not heard of our ——trouble. Mamma has been at Sterborne since early this morning——"

"At Sterborne! I thought Innocent was there; and yet you tell me you have been with her all day——"

"Ernest," said Nelly, breaking in suddenly, "Frederick's wife is dead——"

"Frederick's wife!"

"Yes, it happened late on Saturday. Innocent is somehow mixed up in it. I mean she was there, and saw it happen, and it has—almost—turned her brain."

"She had not much to turn," said Ernest carelessly. "But what does all this mean? Mrs. Frederick dead? You don't mean to tell me, Nelly, that you were so much attached to her as to make a great trouble of that?"

"No, I suppose not," said Nelly, looking at him wistfully, "but still, when any one dies—it is a—shock."

She used her mother's word unconsciously. Words for the moment had become to Nelly symbols, not for the expression, but for the concealment of her meaning; and oh! he surely might have read that there was more than her words said, in her eyes.

"Oh, a shock!" he said contemptuously. "Of course you would not have done anything to bring it about, but when Providence has been so kind as to deliver you from such an unpleasant connexion, you might be grateful at least. By Jove, what a lucky dog he is! he has had his swing, and as soon as the consequences threaten to be unbearable, here comes in some cold or something and carries her off."

"Do you call that lucky?" said Nelly, somewhat woe-begone. "I suppose he loved her, or thought he did!"

"He has given up thinking anything of the sort for some time back, you may be sure," said Ernest. "Well, Nelly, I suppose the conventional correct sort of thing is right for women. Granted that you have had a—shock. But Mrs. Frederick's death cannot have made such a deep impression that you should look ready to cry at *every word*——"

"*I suppose not*," repeated Nelly, with a painful smile. She was

indeed "ready to cry," but not for Mrs. Frederick's death—for many reasons that he could little divine.

"It is not cheerful for a man to come a long round out of his way to see you and find you like this," continued Molyneux. "I don't want to find fault, heaven knows; but when you are of so much importance to me, I ought to be of a little importance to you, don't you think, Nelly? A dowdy old gown, and your eyes red with gazing in the fire, or something else—and the lamp burning low, and a supper-tray or something on the table. Good heavens, what hugger-mugger ways you women fall into when you are left to yourselves! And what now, crying? Nelly, upon my word I don't think I deserve this——"

"I am in trouble, Ernest," said the poor girl, "and you are not. You can't enter into my feelings. I do not want to annoy you with things that you have nothing to do with, as you once upbraided me for doing. Next time perhaps I shall be in better spirits. It is very foolish certainly to cry."

Molyneux walked up and down the room in great impatience. He felt it was time to read a moral lesson to his future wife.

"I wish you would remember, dear," he said, "that neither your life nor mine is to be limited by the walls of this house. You ought to think of something else beyond what's going on here. And really I cannot see that the death of Frederick's wife is much of an occasion for tears——"

"But Innocent was mixed up with it," said Nelly timidly, with a feeling that he must know some time, that it would be better if he knew at once. "Innocent is—very ill—almost out of her mind——"

"Pshaw, Innocent!" he said; "if you open upon that chapter I shall go. I must warn you, Nelly, that I think you all make a great deal of unnecessary fuss over that girl."

This was the result of poor Nelly's faltering attempt to take her lover into her confidence. He went away shortly after, chafing at the folly of women; and she, poor girl, had a cry by herself in the dreary drawing-room before she went to share her mother's vigil up-stairs.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

INNOCENT'S CONFESSION.

AFTER this crisis there came a great lull. Innocent was ill. She lay for some weeks under the power of a mysterious disorder which was sometimes called low fever, and sometimes by other names.

"She had no doubt received a shock," the doctor said, when informed by Mrs. Eastwood to that effect, and this was about all that any one could say. But she was young, and she got better by degrees. They were all very good to her. By the time she was able to come down-stairs Frederick had returned home. He had let his little house in Mayfair, prudently making the best of his domestic calamity, and had gone back to live with his mother after his wife's death, with a gentle melancholy about him which most people, or at least most ladies, found impressive. He had been unfortunate, poor fellow; his marriage had been a terrible mistake, but yet it was very sad and shocking to lose a beautiful young wife so suddenly—and his conduct was most becoming, all that could be desired in the circumstances. Frederick had a luck for coming well out of a bad business. He had taken his own way, and derived from that all the enjoyment procurable, and then Providence had taken the trouble to step in and deliver him from his wife, who could not but have been a hindrance to him in life. Frederick himself accepted very piously this explanation of affairs. I don't know whether he went so far as to believe himself a favourite of heaven, but at heart he felt that he was lucky, very lucky; yet nevertheless he would talk about "my poor wife" now and then with touching pathos, and was very much sympathized with in some circles. On the whole, however, there can be no doubt that he was deeply thankful to find himself back again in The Elms with his career still before him, and no harm done, or at least no harm to speak of. Sometimes, it is true, softening thoughts of tenderness towards the beautiful creature whom he had supposed himself to love would cross his mind. But Amanda's charm had lasted but a very short time, an incredibly short time considering the insane force of the passion which had swept him along to his marriage, and the momentary pangs of loss, which, I suppose, being human, he must sometimes have felt, were as nothing in comparison with the sense of relief and deliverance which came over him when he recalled with an effort the strange feverish episode of life which he had gone through since he left the familiar family home to which he had now returned. Sometimes he wondered if it had been real, or if it was only some strange dream more vivid than usual, so entirely did every trace of that episode pass away, and the old existence come back.

But I think, on the whole, Frederick was a more agreeable inmate since he had gone through this experience. He was not fundamentally improved by his troubles, but he was more civil and tolerant to others. His wife had treated him and his feelings with no consideration at all, and he had not found that treatment agreeable. *Thus* experience made up for him the want of that moral imagination, *if we may* use the word, which enables some of us to put ourselves in the places of others, and consider their feelings by nature.

Frederick was as far as ever from any disposition to sacrifice what he cared for to anybody's convenience—but in matters which he did not care for, he had, it must be allowed, gained a certain power of toleration, and had learned to think that the others might have wishes, and to respect them. He was pleasanter to have in the house, even Nelly acknowledged. Things went more smoothly in the re-united household. Brownlow came back again well pleased, restoring to the house a certain amount of dignity which it had lost; and to all of them Amanda and her brief reign began to appear like a feverish dream.

When Innocent came down-stairs, an invalid, thin and pale, with eyes that seemed to have grown to double their size, and with all that touching weakness which appeals to every good feeling of humanity, Frederick was very good to her. There was nothing he would not do for her gratification. He would stay at home in the evening, and give up other engagements in order to read to her. He would draw her chair from one place to another, and watch over her comfort. Would she soon get quite well? Would she ever be the same creature as before—the passive abstracted little soul, who lived in the midst of them without being of them? In many ways Innocent was changed. She no longer hung upon Frederick as she had once done. Her eyes did not go forth to meet him, her hand to grasp his. Indeed, at first she had been startled by his presence, which was unexpected by her, and had shrunk from him—a fact which piqued him deeply, when at last he found it possible to believe that Innocent was less desirous than usual of his society. She had not the skill to conceal this strange and incomprehensible state of feeling, and when his mother had endeavoured to explain to him that he too was inextricably associated in Innocent's mind with the record of that night which had been the principal turning-point in her existence, Frederick did not like it. "Nonsense!" he had cried, with something of his old warmth; "What is it to her in comparison with what it must be to me? If I can bear it, surely she may be able to bear it. I did not think Innocent had been such a little fool."

"She has strange ideas," said Mrs. Eastwood, trembling as she spoke. "Sometimes I think her mind has been thrown a little off its balance. If she says anything strange to you about her own share in all that was done on that melancholy night, don't treat her with ridicule, Frederick. Sometimes I do not know what to make of her. Sometimes she is very strange."

"She always was," said Frederick, pulling his peaked beard with a certain complacency. He thought he saw through it all. When he brought her from Italy she had been very young, and had not understood her own feelings; and then he married, and his position was changed. But now a further change had come. He was a widower; he was free to love and to marry over again. And

Innocent, developed into self-consciousness, felt this; and felt that she herself in her perilous position had need of great additional prudence in her intercourse with him. Poor Innocent! This interpretation of her motives entirely removed any offence that Frederick might have felt. It gave him a delightful sense of his own powers and attractions, and inclined him doubly towards the little cousin who had so just an appreciation at once of himself and his circumstances. It opened his eyes to many things, among others, to her beauty, which had developed wonderfully. She was now not only very handsome, but handsome in a way which struck everybody. Hers were not the sweet and bright good looks of Nelly, but a quite distinct beauty of a high order—and Frederick began to admire Innocent more than she had ever admired him. He inquired into everything about her, and in the course of his inquiries learned all that happened with Sir Alexis, and was more amused and preoccupied by this piece of news than his mother could have supposed possible. He was amused, she supposed, for he laughed long and low, and could not be done with the subject. "So Longueville thought *he* could have her for the asking," Frederick said, with a laugh which was full of keen and covert excitement. "He was very nice about it," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I think he was really fond of her; and it would be a good thing for Innocent; a man who knows her so thoroughly, and would not expect too much. I don't think he has given up hope."

"Oh, he has not given up hope," said Frederick half fiercely, half laughing. He would not give any explanation of his amusement, but he returned to the subject again and again with a curious interest. And gradually he came to show a great deal of regard and attention to the invalid of the house, to all Innocent's desires and likings, as she came out of her fever. Sometimes she would look at him strangely, as if she had something to tell him, and then would sigh and shrink away, and avoid all conversation with him. Poor, dear little Innocent! she felt the difference. He was no longer a married man, he was free; she could not disclose her guileless love any longer with the sense of security she had once had. Nothing could be more natural, nothing sweeter, more interesting to Frederick—and the whole secret of her conduct seemed to him to be in his hands.

Strangely different were poor Innocent's thoughts. The thing she wanted to do was to tell him of the one event she had never forgotten. "I killed your wife;" these were the words that were constantly on her lips, which in her forlorn honesty, poor child, she could not rest without saying. Though the sense of guilt had never left her, her mind had begun to accustom itself to the idea, horrible as it was. She began to feel herself in a measure the innocent *victim* of fate, guilty without intention. She had not meant it. *Innocent's mind* grew by degrees capable of taking in this thought,

which was more complex than anything she had ever embraced with her intelligence before; she had not meant it—and yet she was guilty. She had reft another of sweet life, she had freed Frederick from his wife. She felt uneasy with him until she had told him, an impostor, approaching him under false pretences. Poor Innocent was in a sad strait between him and his mother. If she told Frederick the terrible secret, which stood like a ghost between them, Mrs. Eastwood would be angry with her. This kept her back; and who could doubt that he, too, would be "angry" when he knew what she had done? The latter thought, however, was an inducement to make the disclosure, for Innocent, in her simplicity, could not bear the thought of keeping the secret, which might alienate her cousin from her, and yet accepting his kindness while she did not deserve it. Thus her secret had driven her out of the primitive region of sentiment in which her mind had hitherto dwelt, into that sphere of mental and moral complication in which most of us have our home. This it was that made her uneasy, embarrassed, almost unhappy with Frederick. It may seem strange to the reader that any additional weight was necessary to disturb the calm of an unhappy girl who thought herself guilty of a murder. But Innocent was passive in feeling, and imagination scarcely existed in her; and besides, I believe that though fictitious miseries are often very terrible, a fictitious guilt like this, though it may affect the mind as if it were real, can scarcely weigh upon the conscience like an actual crime. It is difficult to grope into such darkling corners of nature or to discriminate between moral and intellectual impressions to a point so fine drawn. I do not affirm this as a certainty, but I put it forth as an opinion. Innocent believed that she had been guilty of a terrible crime, and yet she knew, poor child, that she was not guilty. Her mind was oppressed by it, her life clouded, all her peaceful, passive existence revolutionized; but her conscience was not affected to a similar degree. Her consciousness had entered upon an entirely new chapter since this terrible event. Herself had become revealed to her by the light of it, and it was only by this light that she could realize her own individual and independent being; but she was not so unhappy as in the circumstances she ought to have been. She was unhappy with Frederick because he did not know, because he thought otherwise of her than as she deserved; but the general course of her life, though weighed down by this strange new consciousness, was not so unhappy as, according to all rules, it ought to have been.

There came a moment, however, when the crisis of this doubtful intercourse between Innocent and her cousin could not be put off further. Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly were dining out, and Frederick had benignly announced his intention of staying at home to take care of Innocent. This benevolent proposal did not quite meet with the gratitude it deserved. His mother immediately hesitated

about her engagement, wondered whether it was necessary that she should go, and betrayed a general uneasiness, in which Nelly shared. Innocent took little notice, but she did not look at him with soft grateful eyes as she once would have done. He was piqued, and he was rendered obstinate by this mingled indifference and opposition, and, as her engagement was one which Mrs. Eastwood could not really give up, Frederick had his way. Innocent and Dick and he dined together, and when Dick went off to his studies, as was needful, the two, between whom, as poor Innocent felt, that ghost stood, were left alone. It was winter by this time, and the drawing-room at The Elms was very warm and homelike when the ruddy curtains were drawn, the lamp lighted, and the room full of cheerful firelight. Frederick placed his little cousin in the easiest chair; he drew his own seat near her, and took the book he had been reading to her on the previous evening. It was a soft domestic scene, full of tender brotherly affection, kind and pious duty to that feeblest and gentlest of all the kindred, the youngest, the child of the house. Frederick felt a wave of warm and delightful feeling suffuse his heart. In some cases duty itself is the most pleasant of all pastimes, and this was one of those cases. How lovely that passive, dreamy face was as Innocent sat and listened! She was not at work, as so many women think it necessary to be. She was capable of doing absolutely nothing, sitting with her hands laid loosely across each other in her lap, listening—or dreaming—what did it matter? The book that Frederick read was a story of gentle and unexciting interest, a soft and simple narrative, such as Innocent was capable of following. He felt that it was good of him merely to read such a book—a book not adapted to his manly intelligence, food for babes; to have been seen with it in his hand was a kind of certificate of moral character. He, who had so many memories in his life which were far from being domestic or dutiful, felt in this tender moment such an accession of character as was enough to cover a great many peccadillos. And Frederick loved character as much, or even more, though not with so warm a passion as he liked self-indulgence. How exquisite was the sensation when for once in a way duty and self-indulgence went hand in hand!

"Do you like it, Innocent?" he inquired, after a time, pausing to look at her, and laying down his book.

"Yes," said Innocent softly; but she did not look at him as she had been wont.

"You do not care very much for books, though? Do you remember, Innocent, in summer, the first summer you were here, when we used to walk about the garden together? you are changed since that time. You liked me better then than you do now."

"I, Frederick? You were the only one I knew," she said, with a *startled look, moving* uneasily in her chair.

"And you know the others now as well as me—my mother, and Nelly, and Jenny, and Dick, and we are all the same to you? Do you know, Innocent, I liked the old way best?"

She made no answer; her hands twined and untwined themselves in her lap; her soft cheek coloured; it was still pale enough, heaven knows—but the faint tint that came upon it was a blush for her.

"I like the old way best," he continued, taking one of her hands into his. "Innocent, I have been very foolish, I have had a sad life of it for the last year. We must not say anything about the cause; but I have often been far from happy, and I never thought my little cousin would change to me. I could have understood any change in the world sooner than one in *you*."

"I have not changed, Frederick."

"Yes, dear, you have," he said. "Once you liked nothing better than to sit with me, to walk with me; now you are uneasy and anxious to get away. Your hand is trying to escape from my hand; why should it? Do you know, when you used to put it on my arm in the old days in the garden, the soft little touch was always a comfort to me? Don't you think I have more need of comfort now? but you take your hand away, Innocent."

"It is not for that—it is not for that!" she cried. "Oh, Frederick, I must tell you now. My aunt will be angry, and perhaps you will be angry, and never speak to me again; but I must tell you—now."

"What is it, dear?" he said in his softest tones. "I shall not be angry—nothing can make me angry with you."

"Oh, Frederick, you don't know—you never could imagine what I have to tell you. Do not touch me. I am too bad—too terrible! I killed—your wife."

He looked at her with eyes of utter amazement, turning pale—not at this strange intimation, which seemed madness to him—but at the sharp recall to his real position, and the different ideas involved in it. Then he smiled—a somewhat forced smile.

"My dear Innocent, this is the merest madness," he said. "I partly understand what you mean. You think it was your innocent presence that drove poor Amanda into this last fit of passion. Put away the thought from your mind, my poor darling—any one else—any trifling accident would have done the same——"

Innocent kept her eyes fixed upon him, learning what he meant from his face rather than from his words—the words themselves were not adapted to penetrate into her mind. But from his face she knew that he was not angry, that he did not understand—that he was soothing her, persuading her that she was mistaken, as her aunt had done.

"It was not the passion—it was what I gave her from the bottle," she said, her voice falling very low—"her medicine to make her

sleep; she shook me—she snatched it from my hand; that killed her—and it was I who did it. Now, now you understand!—and I know you will never speak to me again."

"Good God!" he cried, and rose to his feet in sudden blind misery and bewilderment, driven wild for the moment by a horrible doubt, which brought up before him in a second of time half-a-dozen scenes and suggestions. He had seen Amanda live through so many paroxysms of passion—why should she have died of that one? And Innocent had fled like a hunted creature from the house; why had she fled? These questions, that never occurred to him before, fell upon him now all at once. He seemed to see again the darkened house, the sudden excitement and horror falling into the ordinary stillness of night, the sudden change from ordinary events and the usual tenor of existence to death—confusion and trouble for the survivors; eternal silence for the one who had been the most exuberant, the most violent in her vitality. God in heaven! was the child mad and raving; or could this horrible confession be true?

Innocent sat very still in her chair, looking at him with fixed eyes. She had made her confession, and calm had returned to her. Her pale, slender hands lay loosely clasped in her lap, relieved against the black dress which she wore as mourning for Amanda. Her eyes were anxious, following his every look and gesture, but perfect calm had fallen upon her slight figure, her habitual attitude. Her secret was told, and all her embarrassment and uneasiness gone. To look at her so, and to believe that she was an actor in any such tragedy was impossible. Frederick was overcome; his eyes filled with tears. He was surprised by an overflow of feeling which he did not know how to restrain. He went to the back of her chair and bent over her, putting down his hand upon hers.

"Innocent," he cried, "you are dreaming, you are raving; it is impossible, anything is possible but this."

She lifted her face to him, searching into the expression of his with her anxious eyes. "Oh, do not be angry," she said, like a child that had done some petty wrong.

The incongruity of the appeal, the words so foolishly simple, the look so tragically anxious, had such an effect upon Frederick as nothing in his life had ever had before. Was the murder of which she accused herself no more to this child than the breaking of a piece of china, the neglect of some trifling duty? God help them all! Wonder, horror, pity, love, all complicated with the mystery of a doubt which could not be shaken off, and a certainty which was above all doubt, distracted the very soul of the man, who could no more understand Innocent than she could understand him. He *took her uplifted* face in his hands and kissed the forehead again *and again.* "Innocent, forget this madness," he said, "you make

me wretched as well as yourself, for I love you—I love you better than anything in the world."

"Ah!" she cried, freeing herself and turning away; "but I cannot forget, I can never forget. For I did it; I did not mean it, but I did it. Do not be angry; but you must never say you love me again."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

INTO FURTHER DEEPS.

WHEN Mrs. Eastwood came back she found that Innocent had gone to bed with a headache, and Frederick, with an agitated face, sat silent, brooding over the fire by himself. He had no book nor paper to occupy him, and his face was clouded, as it had been in the days of excitement before his marriage, or those of unhappiness which followed after. He said little while Nelly was in the room, but suggested crossly that she should go and look after Innocent. "If you will take the trouble," he said. His tone was full of irritation, as it had been in the old times, but seldom in the new. Mrs. Eastwood made Nelly a sign to obey. She saw at once what had happened. She went and stood by her son's side as Nelly went up-stairs.

"What does this mean, mother?" he said, turning moody eyes, which looked red and feverish, upon her. "What does it mean? Innocent has been raving about something I don't understand. Surely anything which concerns me so much might have been told me. For God's sake! what does it mean?"

"A delusion," said Mrs. Eastwood quietly, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

"A delusion! It is too serious, too terrible, to be a delusion. She must be mad. The shock must have turned her brain."

"It is mere delusion," said Mrs. Eastwood, with tears. "I went down to Sterborne, as you know, and inquired into everything. You remember that terrible morning, Frederick? You thought I went out of regard for your wife and her father. I went for Innocent's sake;—now I can tell you. I inquired into everything. It is a mere delusion; there is no foundation for it, nothing to rest upon. But I cannot chase it from the poor child's mind, and I knew she would tell you some day. I would not have had you know for much; but now that you do know, you must help me with Innocent. She must be convinced."

"Tell me the whole," said Frederick; and she sat down by him

by the fireside, and told him everything, omitting only by instinct to mention the presence of the housemaid when poor Innocent made her first confession. He drew from her by degrees every particular of the poor girl's arrival at home, her consistent story, from which she had never departed, and the little phial which had been clasped in her hand. This she showed him, taking it out of a desk in which she had locked it up. It had still a few drops of the opiate in it, and was labelled with the name of Mrs. Frederick Eastwood, and the date. The sight of this strange piece of evidence made Frederick shiver. It made him feel strangely for a moment, as if Amanda still lived, and could have still such drugs administered to her. "It would be better to destroy this," he said, taking it out of his mother's hand. She took it back from him anxiously, and put it in the desk again.

"Why should we destroy it?" she said.

"It is the sort of evidence that would tell," he said, with once more a nervous shiver.

"Oh, Frederick!" cried his mother, "you don't mean to tell me that you think—it may be true?"

"I don't know what to think," he said gloomily. "Mother, I am very unhappy. I care more for Innocent than I ever thought I did. God help us—it sounds very real. Why should she have taken such a thought into her simple mind?"

"God knows!" said his mother, and, moved in her turn, she began to cry, all her doubts and fears returning at the mere thought that some one else thought it possible, thought it true. They sat together over the dying fire, and talked it over in detail, entering into every particular, every recollection. They drew close together in mutual confidence; but they gave each other no comfort. Broken words that had seemed to have no connexion with anything actual came floating back to their memories. Frederick even remembered, with the feeling as of an arrow which had suddenly struck and stung him, the words he himself had heard as he entered his wife's room on that eventful night, "Can judges get people off?" and both of them were well aware how freely, how simply Innocent had announced her dislike to Frederick's wife. I do not believe that Frederick had ever been so deeply affected in his life; but even at that moment there came into his mind a certain sombre consciousness of satisfied vanity which made things look still more black for Innocent. "Her known affection for me will supply the motive at once," he said; his very vanity made him believe the whole strange tale. His mother wavered between wondering doubts how if it were quite untrue such an idea could have come into Innocent's mind, taking possession of it so strongly—and a sense that it was impossible, that nothing so hideous and terrible could be. But *Frederick, by mere* stress of conviction that Innocent loved and had *always loved him,* found possibility, reality in the story at once. He

did not even believe her own dreary assertion that she had not meant it. With the certainty of intuition he felt that, being alone with her rival, some irresistible impulse which she perhaps scarcely understood had come over her, some impulse which, being but momentary, had faded perhaps from her recollection. He was very miserable. If ever self-complacency brought its own punishment, this did. His unhappiness was intense in proportion to his conviction, which allowed of no doubt. "What shall we do with her?" he said.

"Oh, Frederick!" said Mrs. Eastwood, "you take everything for proved; and nothing is proved, not even the very first step. Neither you nor any one at Sterborne had the slightest suspicion. Nobody thought of Innocent as implicated. The death arose from natural causes, which had been foreseen, understood. The doctor himself——"

"Ah, the doctor," said Frederick, "perhaps I ought to see the doctor. But it might excite suspicion. The doctor was going away—he had got an appointment somewhere abroad."

"But I saw him," said Mrs. Eastwood, "he was most distinct in what he said to me—more medical than I could understand—but very clear. He said he had expected it for years, that Mr. Batty knew—that you even had been told——"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Frederick, "that was all very well. Her heart was affected; and very fortunate it is for us that such an idea existed. But, mother, Amanda, poor girl, has been in a much greater passion with me than she ever could have been with Innocent, and did not die. Why did she die just then, with no one else present, and with this business about the opiate? I wish you would throw that little bottle into the fire. It is the sort of thing which would affect a stupid juryman more than evidence."

"Oh, Frederick!" said Mrs. Eastwood, trembling and crying; "for God's sake, don't talk as if it could ever come to that."

"Why shouldn't it come to that? If Batty once gets hold of the story, he will not let it rest, I promise you. He knows I hate him, and have always done so, and he would believe it. Unfortunately, poor Amanda was aware of Innocent's feeling for me."

"Frederick," said Mrs. Eastwood, "Innocent, I am sure, had no feeling for you that an innocent girl might not have for her first friend, her protector, her relation——"

Mrs. Eastwood was not so sure of this as she professed to be, and the want of certainty showed itself in her voice. And Frederick was convinced to the contrary, and felt that he was right, whatever any one might say.

"You did not always think so, mother," he said. "I wish with all my heart it had not been so—but you must see that this feeling on Innocent's part changes at once the whole character of the story. It gives it a motive, it makes it possible. A girl would

not do such a thing for nothing; but the moment you supply the motive——"

"Frederick, for heaven's sake! you speak not only as if she had done it, but as if she had meant to do it——"

"I speak as Batty would think, and as his lawyer would put it," said Frederick, with sombre certainty. "The best thing we could do, mother, would be to send her away. If she were taken to some out-of-the-way place—in Italy, perhaps, as she knows Italy——"

"I cannot give up my poor child's cause like this," cried his mother. "Send her away as if she were guilty—banish her from her home——"

"It will be easier, you may take my word for it, to prevent an inquiry than to defend her if once accused," said Frederick. "To have her accused would be ruin and misery to us all. I might be brought in. Don't you see that mere acquittal would do little for us? The scandal is the terrible thing; and everybody would believe it, whether it was proved or not."

Such was the consultation going on down-stairs while Innocent, strangely moved and agitated, lay in her little white bed looking at Nelly. The girl was not as she had been before; new thoughts were in her mind, new troubles in her heart. But she could not confide these to her cousin. She said simply, "I have told Frederick," as Nelly kissed her and asked after her headache. No such pretences as headaches were possible to her simple soul.

"You have told Frederick?—Oh, Innocent!—of this delusion, this fancy——"

"Of what happened," said Innocent, "and he was very kind to me; he was not angry. Nelly, tell me—will he always live here——"

"I suppose so," said Nelly, "but never mind Frederick. Innocent, you promised not to think of this—not to talk of it. It is a dream, a delusion. Mamma told you so. You promised to think of it no more——"

Innocent shook her head with a faint smile. "I cannot help it," she said. "But you are sure Frederick will stay here always, Nelly?"

"Oh, what has Frederick to do with it?" said Nelly impatiently; and she kissed her little cousin again and bade her go to sleep. When she had got to the door, however, her heart smote her that she had been unkind. She came back with tears in her eyes.

"What have you done, you poor child," she said, "that you should be tormented like this? Oh, Innocent, say your prayers and ask God to put it away out of your mind."

"I will try," said Innocent.

Nelly went to her own room and wept—out of grief, out of pity, out of impatience and impotence. Everything was out of joint, and *nothing poor* Nelly could do would set it right. When her mother *came up some time* after and told her the scope of her conversation

with Frederick, and his suggestion to send Innocent away, Nelly blazed into generous momentary passion. "Give her up altogether!" she cried. "Send the poor child away whom God has trusted to us——"

"That is what I feel, dear," said Mrs. Eastwood, "but Frederick says——"

"Oh, I don't want to know what Frederick says! I am sick of Frederick—and all men," said poor Nelly. "Mamma, let us all go away somewhere and hide ourselves from this horrible world——"

"Nelly, Nelly," said her mother with a smile, "which of us would tire soonest of that? You have other bonds which you forget in your haste—and I have the boys."

When Nelly was told of these other bonds she held her peace, with a flush upon her face. Yes, she had other bonds, and of all the four unhappy people who lay down under the kindly old roof of The Elms on that agitating night, she perhaps was the most unhappy. A heart running over with love, pity, generous impulses, but obstructed wherever her feet turned, unable to leaven her little world with her own generous thoughts, unable to convince it of what seemed so clear to her, bound down by meannesses, by selfishness at which her soul revolted. The others were free more or less to follow their own instincts, but for her she was in bonds—a spirit imprisoned, writhing under the cords that tied her, struggling with her fate.

"Oh, Nelly," said Mrs. Eastwood before she went to bed, "what can have become of John Vane? He is the one man in the world I could talk to about it all, and who could tell us what was best."

Nelly made no reply. Her thoughts, too, had travelled perhaps the same way, but even while they did so it made her heart sore and bitter to think that it was John Vane, and not another, who was "the one man in the world" to help them in their terrible strait.

Innocent slept little that night. Something new was working in the girl's mind. All the household almost without exception believed that she had been "in love" with Frederick from the time he brought her home; and Frederick himself believed it most completely of all, as has been shown. But Innocent herself had never thought of love, had known nothing of it, nor what it was. She had learned it for the first time that night. The discovery she made was not of anything in herself. She, in her simplicity, in her preoccupation, was as quietly still and affectionate in her emotions as she had ever and always been. But Frederick's looks, his words, his touch, had startled her in her unbroken virginal calm. He had told her he loved her. Perhaps under other circumstances Innocent would have received this with childlike gratitude, and have said to herself simply that he was "kind"—how kind he was! But there was something in this interview which made so gentle an interpretation

of the words impossible. Innocent felt without knowing that there was a difference, and the difference alarmed her, she could not tell why. It did not occur to her to think that the outburst was momentary, nor could she have believed that Frederick himself at that very moment was plotting her banishment. The impression made on her mind was not complex but single. He loved her not as the others loved, with a love which Innocent vaguely knew led to other ties and other consequences. This thought did not move her, as does the first suggestion of love which is destined to be happy; it filled her with fright and pain. She felt by instinct that between her and Frederick there was a gulf which could never be passed—a ghost, which kept them apart from each other; yet they were here, under the same roof, compelled to meet daily—and he loved her! The more she thought of it the more alarmed and sick at heart Innocent grew. How could she avoid him, resist him, put away from her all the old habits which had grown into her life? She who had been used to put her hand in his, to take his arm, to talk to him more freely than to any one else—all this would be impossible if he loved her. She would shrink from the warmer incomprehensible sentiment, but how could she shrink from Frederick? What would they all say? What would they think if she, who had so clung to him, were to turn from him? she could not do it. With an imagination newly awakened, which had sprung up suddenly in self-defence, she saw herself constrained to do as Frederick pleased: led with him where he chose to lead her, drawn into new circumstances which she did not understand, yet shrank from. To put these vague sentiments of fright, repulsion, and alarm into words is to do them wrong, and to give to them a distinctness which they did not possess, but words are the only medium I have for conveying to the reader any idea of the state of confusion, shame, pain, and terror which vaguely filled the mind of Innocent. This terror of Frederick's love was, perhaps, quite undue and unnecessary, since Frederick had already realized the necessity for quenching anything like love for Innocent, and thought himself quite strong enough to do so. But perhaps it was some subtle consequence of the mistaken notion he had so long entertained of her love for him, which produced this mistaken notion on her part of his love for her, and became the motive of the most decided act of her life. She did not sleep. The long, long winter night, which felt as if it would never end, spun out its lingering hours of darkness, while all these things passed darkly through her mind—but as she waked and dreamed there suddenly occurred to her a way of escape—a prospect of help. She had made a promise of which no one knew—a promise which had never before recurred to her mind from the moment she made it; this promise suddenly returned to her memory in her moment of deepest darkness. She had promised if she needed help, if she wanted change—a thing impossible at that

moment, impossible a few hours ago, but now so real and so necessary—to seek it from one man; not the friend for whom Mrs. Eastwood sighed, whom Nelly bitterly and against her will involved in her thoughts; a saviour, whose name occurred to poor Innocent now as a sudden and only refuge in her trouble. When she thought of him, and remembered her promise to him, Innocent fell asleep. She had some one in whose hands she could place her difficulty, and at once her own labouring mind, unused to any such burdens, was eased.

She said nothing to any one of her purpose. She felt instinctively that had she spoken of it she would have been prevented from carrying out her intention. She did nothing, and said nothing, even to Alice, until next afternoon, when Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly went out on some necessary business. They thought it too cold for Innocent, and placed her in an easy chair by the fire, with the story-book which Frederick had been reading to her on the previous night. If anything had been wanting to confirm her resolution, this book would have done it. As soon as they were gone she went to her room and dressed herself carefully. She took care to make no appeal to Alice, who would have stopped her, she knew, and dressed herself without aid, taking out her best dress, the new mourning which became her pale and dreamy beauty. No one observed her as she went out, and very swift and straight, looking neither to the right hand nor the left, she pursued her way. She had gone with Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly more than once to the house where Sir Alexis Longueville had so often something to show his friends—now a new picture, now a rare flower, now some costly and elaborate piece of furniture. He was fond of everything that was rare and costly, and his bachelor house was one of the sights which connoisseurs delighted to be admitted to. It was not very far from The Elms, a detached house surrounded by a garden, which, in its way, was a sight too, notwithstanding the near neighbourhood of London smoke. Sir Alexis lived by himself in this dainty dwelling-place. It was like a child to him; he was constantly making alterations, projecting this and that, improving upon the unimprovable; and the house was a showhouse. Nevertheless, when Innocent, young and alone, made her way to the door, and asked for Sir Alexis, the man who opened it to her was startled. Sir Alexis had not always been the irreproachable middle-aged gentleman he was now, and his old servant, as well as his old friends, recollected passages in his life which were not such as to make the visit of a young girl alone a natural occurrence. The servant stared at Innocent, and told her that his master was engaged, and made various excuses. But Innocent was imperious to all such hesitations. She would not tell what her business was, she would not be put off. "Tell him I want him," she said, walking in, in her simplicity. Such a girl, absolutely pre-occupied, unconscious

of any evil, pursuing her object without *arrière pensée*, without fear or thought of harm, is, I believe, safe to go over the world without let or hindrance. She hesitated only when the man asked her her name. "Say it is Innocent," she answered at last, with a look of perfect gravity which checked the smile which began to form about his lips.

"A young lady?" said Sir Alexis, when the message was delivered to him. "Alone? it must be some mistake."

"No mistake, Sir Alexis," said the man, suffering the incipient grin to show itself, but with a cautious watchfulness lest it should be out of place. "When I asked if there was any name, she gave me a queer name. I don't know if she's all right *here*. She bid me to tell you, Sir Alexis, as how it was Innocent——"

"Innocent!" said Longueville, starting up. "You idiot, why did not you tell me? Where have you put her?" and with a haste and anxiety which put all thought of a grin out of his attendant's head, Sir Alexis rushed out, thrusting away the man, whose mind changed on the subject in the twinkling of an eye.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN APPEAL.

"INNOCENT! you here, and alone—where are the others?" cried Sir Alexis, taking both her hands.

"I have come—because I promised," said Innocent—"no one knows. You were to help me if I wanted help; I have come—for that. If I ever wanted to go away—to have some one to help me—that was what you said.—Surely you recollect?"

"Recollect! yes, I recollect," he said, in agitation and dismay, and led her to a seat. He looked at her with a wonder which words could not express, and with a troubled sense of his accountability for having made such a promise which had never occurred to him at the moment it was made. To have her here in his house, all alone, was an indecorum which struck the old man of the world as it never would have struck Innocent. "My dear child, tell me what it is—I will walk home with you," he said in his confusion, not knowing what other suggestion to make.

"But I do not want to go home," said Innocent. "I came to you to help me. I have a great deal to tell you; but if they see me they *will take* me back, they will not understand. Oh, keep me here!—*help me as you said*——"

"Innocent! you bewilder me. What has happened—what can I do? But, whatever I can do, my dear child, it will be better for you to be at home."

"I do not think so," she said; "and I have been thinking a great deal—I have been very unhappy—there is a great deal, a very great deal to tell you. But for thinking of you, I do not know what I should have done. It was because you said so yourself that I have come——"

"Yes, I did say so," he murmured in his confusion. He was confused, but she was perfectly calm; her eyes met his with their childish look of appeal; no consciousness, no embarrassment, nothing in them that was not simple as her soul. The man's heart was touched beyond expression. "Yes, my dear," he said, "I did say so—and this house is yours, and everything in it. You shall stay if you will—you shall do with it as you please. I am grieved—grieved to the heart that you should be unhappy. Have confidence in me—I will do everything for you that I could do for—my own child."

"Thanks," she said gently, "you were always kind;" and then seemed to fall into a half-reverie—a dreamy, self-absorbed pause. "I have so much to tell you," she resumed, "I don't know where to begin——"

"Tell me first why you have left home?" he asked.

A faint colour came upon her cheek—"That comes last of all," she said, "and till you hear the first you will not understand. Frederick has come home. He lives with us again as he used to do; and last night—we talked—and he said he loved me. He must not love me, it is terrible so much as to think of it, after what has happened. And how could I live there and see him every day when that is what he is thinking? So I remembered you, and came to you to help me. Now, please, I want to go away—to stay there no longer—Take me, as you said you would—Take me away."

"Innocent, do you understand what you are saying?" he asked, once more taking both her hands in his. Her words roused him out of all secondary feelings. There was no passion left in his steady, middle-aged soul for any woman; but this strange creature had charmed him by her strangeness, her rarity, the pathos of her beauty. She had refused him as few men are refused, and now had she come to offer herself to him? Middle-aged as he was, he could not refuse to be moved by a quickening thrill of excitement; nothing could have made him an impassioned lover, but he was glad to have her, and his heart grew fond and tender as he held her hands. "Innocent!" he repeated, "do you mean this? Think! Do not encourage me and then disappoint me. There is but one way that I can take you anywhere. You must marry me first, do you know?"

She shrank a little instinctively, looking at him all the time with serious eyes, which shrank not, and then said slowly, "Yes—I know."

He was so startled by this assent, so taken by surprise, and, at the same time, so put upon his guard by all the decorums and punctilios of which she knew nothing, that he made no such response as a lover might have made. He uttered some broken exclamations in his bewilderment. The surprise was a joyful one; but yet it was a surprise, and brought as much wonder with it as pleasure. Then Sir Alexis remembered suddenly, in the midst of his confusion, what was owing to the self-respect of a woman who had thus rashly risked herself and her womanly credit. He kissed the small, slender, girlish hands one after another with reverential fervour. "Thanks, a thousand times, for your generous confidence," he said. "I hope I am worthy of the trust. It is settled between us, then, of your free will, Innocent—of your free will? you will be my wife?"

"Yes," she said once more, grave as if she were uttering the sentence of her own fate. He bent over her, and kissed her forehead; then rising hastily rang the bell.

"Go to my sister," he said, giving his orders at the door of the room, orders which Innocent neither heard nor comprehended; "and ask her to come to me at once. She will do me a great service if she will be here in half an hour." Then he came back, and sat down by his future bride.

"Innocent, my darling, now that this is settled between us you can speak to me with confidence. What is it? Frederick would not, could not, have been rude to you? He is a gentleman at least. It is well for me, however, that this happened; but tell me, dear, what it was," he said, drawing her close to him. It seemed incredible to see her there in his house, bestowing herself upon him, she who only the other day had been so startled by his advances. He was flattered, touched, startled, full of wonder, not knowing what to do or to say.

"Yes," said Innocent, with a sigh, "but there is a great deal to say first. Perhaps when I have told you, you will cease to care, you will be angry, you will not want me. You say No; but you don't know what I have to say."

"Nothing you can say will affect me, my dear," he said, with almost fatherly fondness, and an incredulous, admiring smile.

"Ah, but you do not know!" cried Innocent; and then her voice fell into a low strain of narrative—gentle yet penetrating and clear as a bell. "I was sent down to the High Lodge——"

"Has it something to do with that?" said the new bridegroom, gradually glowing into elevation of feeling more fitted to the occasion. "Then let us put off talking of it. You have been ill, my *poor child.* Your pretty cheek is pale. You are looking worn and *thin.* You shall go to Italy, to Pisa, Innocent——"

"Ah!" she said, with a deep sigh, long drawn out, and tremulous; "but first you must hear."

"Not first, my darling—after, when we have spoken of things more important. We will go to Longueville first, and then to Italy. You shall take me to your old house, and we will find your old Niccolo——"

"Ah!" she said again, this time with a slight nervous shiver; "but you must hear—first you must hear. When I tell you, perhaps it will change everything. I was sent to the High Lodge; but it is not about that—Frederick saw me in the church, and took me to see his wife."

"Is it about Frederick and his wife? I am tired of Frederick. You are trembling, Innocent. Leave this story for another time. It cannot make any difference to me."

"To see his wife," said Innocent, going on in a low, steady tone, as if, once started, she had no longer power to stop. "She was ill. She used to have fits of being angry. She would raise her voice and scold every one, it did not matter whom, even Frederick. He was very kind to me—he always was very kind."

"Enough about Frederick," said Sir Alexis, with some impatience. "Innocent, you cannot think that your cousin is particularly interesting to me."

"Do not be angry," she said, with an appealing look. "He took me to his wife. I stayed with her a long time. She made me read. Sometimes she was angry, sometimes she was kind. I read and read; and then I fell asleep——"

"Selfish cur!" cried Sir Alexis, "to put the nursing of that terrible wife of his upon you."

"I woke up to hear her scolding. Oh, how red she was! how her eyes blazed! She shook me and called to me, and cried that she would strike me. I was not half awake; I was trembling——"

"Poor Innocent, you are trembling now. My darling, what does all this matter? Another time will do——"

"I had to drop the drops," said Innocent, sinking her voice lower; "I had never done it before. My hand shook and she scolded, and I could not. At last—oh, do not be angry—she seized it out of my hand, and drank it. Listen! she drank it—and then she died. Do you know what that means? I killed Frederick's wife!"

"Good God! Innocent!"

"I was afraid—I was afraid!—I knew you would be angry!" she cried.

Sir Alexis withdrew the arm he had put round her. He was speechless with wonder and horror. "Good God!" he repeated, when he had found his voice; "what did you do?"

"What did I do?" she asked vaguely, looking at him with wonder and incomprehension.

"Yes; you alarmed the people, of course? You told them what

had happened?—you had everything done that could be done? How strange that I should have heard nothing of all this!" he said, rising to his feet.

Innocent's heart sank within her. She looked up at him with anxious eyes, into which the tears were coming. No one had been angry before. They had all wept over her, comforted her. But now, at last, he was angry in whom she had placed her last hope. Sobs began to rise in her throat; she deserved that he should be angry, she knew—yet she looked up at him with a pitiful appeal against his wrath. She was guilty of killing Frederick's wife; but of all this that came after—this which she ought to have done, and did not—no one had ever told her. She made him no reply save by her look, by the big tears that rose into her eyes.

He had risen from her side rather in excitement and dismay than with any intention of deserting the poor child who had thus thrown herself upon him. When his eyes returned to her, and he met her piteous look, his heart melted. He came back and sat down by her again. "Poor Innocent," he said, "poor little bewildered child! What did you do?"

"I came home," she said, shivering. "When they told me she was dead, I could not stay any longer. It was dark night—very late. I never was out so late before. I came home——"

"And you never told them? you did not say what you had done?"

"Do not be angry!" said poor Innocent, bursting into sobs that were piteous to hear.

He took her into his arms, and did what he could to comfort her. Poor child! poor man, who had bound himself unawares to her foolish fate! He never doubted her story for a moment, nor supposed that she had told him anything less or more than the simple facts; and while he soothed her, and tried to subdue her sobs, his mind set to work seriously, thinking how a way was to be made for her out of this coil which she had woven about her own feet. He was not less sorry for her than the others had been, but his mind was cooler and more ready to act in this emergency. To suppose that she had killed Frederick's wife, as she thought, was absolute folly, of course, he said to himself; but her flight, her silence as to what she had done, her hurried return home, howsoever effected, would be terribly against her. He set his whole faculties to work to find a way out of it. "I am not angry," he said to her, "my poor child! how could I be angry? Innocent, Innocent, you must compose yourself. You must stop crying, and let me think what it is best to do."

Just then the door opened hastily, and Mrs. Barclay bustled in smiling and rustling, and gay, with her ample silken skirts and cheerful countenance.

"What is all this, Alexis?" she said; "what do you want me for

in such a hurry? What do you mean by having young ladies here? Ah, Innocent, my sweet! I had it borne in upon me that it must be you."

Sir Alexis stumbled up to his feet, and Innocent checked her sobs as by magic, and turned wondering to the new comer. "My dear sister, you have judged rightly," he said. "Innocent has come to me about a difficulty she is in. I will go now to your aunt and see about it, my darling, and my sister will take care of you. Lucilla, this is Lady Longueville that is to be. You are the first to know it; you will take care of my poor little darling? She is ill and nervous! give her some wine, or tea, or something, and make her lie down and rest."

"That I will," said kind Mrs. Barclay, "I'll take care of her—the little puss! I knew this was coming. I said it all along from the very first day you saw her, Alexis; and I hope she'll be a sweet little wife to you, as good as she's pretty. I could not say more than that. My dear brother, how I wish you joy!"

And she kissed him heartily, and kissed Innocent, and laughed and cried in honest pleasure, the strangest contrast to the grave emotion, the piteous self-abandonment upon which she came like the very angel of commonplace life, good-humour, and kindly feeling. She went with her brother to the door, shaking hands with him in her satisfaction. "Do you mean to say there has been some quarrel with the Eastwoods?" she said in an undertone.

"No quarrel, but something, I don't quite know what. Make her rest, Lucilla, and don't allow her to talk. Let me find her well when I return—for then we must decide what to do."

"Trust me, I'll take care of her," said the cheerful woman, and in another moment Innocent found herself all alone with this stranger, in a new world, deserted by everybody, everything strange around her, except the kind words which she was used to hear, though not from this voice. Her head swam, and there was a ringing as of bells in her ears. But amid the desolation and pain she felt, there was also a sense of calm pervading her whole soul. This time she had put off the burden bodily, and some one else had taken it up. She had a trust in Sir Alexis, which was produced perhaps by the different way in which he had treated her confession. He had gone away to do something, to deliver her somehow. To bring back Amanda to life, perhaps, and make the dream come to an end; the dream of death or the dream of life, it did not seem to matter much to Innocent which was brought to an end. For what was she herself from her first chapter till now but a dream—a very dream?

Sir Alexis, too, felt very much like a man in a dream as he took his hat and buttoned his coat with habitual composure, though his whole being was shaken by the extraordinary position in which he found himself, and the extraordinary revelation just made to him. He walked along the suburban road towards The Elms with his

mind full of strange and painful deliberations. His pretty Innocent, the rare and strange creature whom he had coveted as the very crown and flower of all his rarities and costly possessions, was it possible that the first sign of his acquisition of her was this plunge into terrible realities affecting life and death? He took a different view of the matter from that which had occurred to the Eastwoods. He never doubted that things were as she had said, and that Amanda's death had really been caused by the excessive opiate. Such things had happened ere now, a painful and haunting recollection, no doubt, to those unhappily involved in them, but not coming within any possible range of crime, or calling for the penalties of justice. To any creature in her senses the situation, though most painful, would have been simple enough. Had Innocent alarmed the house at once, had she called for instant help, and informed the attendants what had happened, she might indeed have regretted and grieved all her life, but she would have been delivered from all blame. But—God help the poor child!—she had done everything, on the contrary, to draw suspicion upon her, to give an air of real guilt to her wild proceedings. Sir Alexis could not even make out how it was that up to this time no notice had been taken of such an extraordinary incident. Had the family concluded to hush it up? had they managed to bribe or intimidate the doctor to hush all reports? That seemed almost incredible too. As he went quickly along he planned out and resolved upon a totally different style of proceeding. To have the matter investigated at once, and have Innocent's real share in it fully ascertained, seemed the only expedient possible. Without that what horrors might hang over her; what accusations ready to be brought up in after days if she made any enemies, or if he made any enemies, which was more likely! Thus he went on with a very anxious face to The Elms, where Innocent's absence had just been discovered with consternation. Nelly had been searching for her through the garden, and came in breathless through the conservatory, as Sir Alexis entered by the drawing-room door.

"She is not in the garden," he heard Nelly say, in a tone of fright and anxiety. The ladies were both pale, and looked at each other with miserable embarrassment when he came in. Here was one of those domestic agonies which women have to suffer so often—a terrible emergency demanding all their thoughts, and an indifferent visitor suddenly thrust into it, to whom they must say nothing, betray nothing. Sir Alexis relieved them however at once of their pain.

"You are anxious about Innocent?" he said. "I have come at once to relieve you. She is with me—that is, with my sister—she is quite safe——"

"With you, Sir Alexis? Where did you find her? She must *have gone* out—for a walk—" said Mrs. Eastwood, struggling to *show neither* her great surprise nor her still greater relief.

"We are old friends," cried Sir Alexis, taking Mrs. Eastwood's hand. "We have known a great deal about each other for years. Do not let it vex you that I know this. Innocent has told me everything; she has put herself in my hands."

"Innocent—has put herself in your hands?—Are we dreaming, Nelly?" cried Mrs. Eastwood, struck by the apparent slight, the apparent abandonment, and looking at her visitor with mingled offence, mortification, and wonder. "Do you mean that she has gone to you—from us—— Sir Alexis, this cannot be the child's doing. It is an unpardonable interference—an—intrusion——"

"Hear me first," he said. "I am guiltless in the matter. It *is* the child's own doing. Something frightened her—about Frederick—I cannot tell you what. I had told her that I was at her service if ever she wanted me. You know how one says such words. She came to me this morning. She has consented to be my wife—" he went on gravely, after a pause—"of her own will—and she has told me all her story. Naturally I have come to you at once——"

There was a pause—they looked at each other, each uncertain what was the next step to be taken—the next word to be said.

"She has—consented——" Mrs. Eastwood repeated in dismay. "Sir Alexis, I am her nearest relation, her only guardian;—I cannot let you suffer for the sake of honour. When you spoke to her first there was no such cloud upon her, poor child. I cannot let you take our burden upon yourself."

"I do not object to the burden," he said gravely—"with her I accept it, such as it is. I do not ask for your sanction, because you gave it formally—you authorized my addresses to her. The question is now what can we best do to set this painful business at rest—to prove that it was mere accident—a chance that might happen to any one——"

"It is a delusion!" cried Mrs. Eastwood. "A mere delusion! there is nothing in it. Oh, Sir Alexis, believe me, though my children doubt. I hastened down to Sterborne as soon as Innocent came back; I got there on Monday morning—I saw all Mrs. Frederick's family, every one concerned; the doctor assured me positively that she died of heart disease, as he had expected for years she would. Nobody had the slightest thought of Innocent as any way involved. There is not a suspicion—not an idea—in any mind but her own."

Sir Alexis had risen as she began this statement, and gradually went forward to her, holding out his hands. Mrs. Eastwood rose, too, half sobbing, as she concluded, and gave him hers.

"Is this true?" he cried, with the water in his eyes, the unspeakable sense of relief proving to him, for the first time, what a horrible weight had been lying on his heart.

"Absolutely true!" she said, through her tears—feeling as she said it convinced by his faith, and by the intensity of her own

words. What could be more sure? Every word she said to him was fact, as distinct and clear as it could be expressed—and yet——

Sir Alexis' relief was so great that he rose into instant exhilaration and happiness. He dismissed the subject for the moment, and unfolded to Innocent's guardian all he meant and wished to do. No end could be served, he said, by delay. He wished to marry her as soon as possible, to take her to Longueville, to Italy, to restore the freshness of her mind by new scenes. And the others, glad of the relief, entered into this lighter talk, and became almost merry over Innocent's prospects. Yet Sir Alexis left The Elms almost with as grave a countenance as he had entered it. When the conversation returned to the subject of poor Innocent's "delusion," the further information they gave him brought back painful uncertainty to his mind. Was it simple delusion after all—or was there something true at the bottom—something which might still produce grief and sorrow to her, unhappy, and to all concerned?

CHAPTER XL.

FAMILY OPINIONS.

It was thought best that Innocent should be brought back that evening to The Elms, where Mrs. Barclay accompanied her full of smiles and congratulations. "Since he could not have the one, my dear, he set his heart upon having the other," she said to Mrs. Eastwood; "otherwise I am sure he would never have married at all. He had made up his mind to have one of your girls. A good mother makes a good daughter; that has always been the doctrine in our family,—and oh, how glad I am that the old stock is not to be allowed to die out! It will be such a disappointment to the Huntly Longuevilles, they never could bear Alexis,—and I am sure if I once saw him with a nice wife and a young family, I would wish for nothing more in this world——"

"We must not go so fast," said Mrs. Eastwood.

"Oh, no, of course we must say nothing about that," said Mrs. Barclay, nodding and laughing in supreme satisfaction. She and her brother remained to dinner, and but for the moroseness of Frederick, who contemplated the whole matter with almost savage dissatisfaction, the evening would have been a more cheerful one than the Eastwood family had passed for some time. Frederick, however, was half frantic in his opposition when the party dispersed.

He asked his mother how she could permit such a sacrifice,—how she could allow such a child to pledge herself to a man old enough to be her grandfather? "If you call that love for Innocent, I don't know what love means," he said.

"It is Innocent's own doing," said his mother in self-defence; "it is she alone who is responsible. I have had nothing to do with it, for I feel as you do, Frederick,—to some extent."

"To some extent!—I don't know how you can limit the extent," he cried in fiery indignation,—"and how about this,—what do you call it?—this fancy,—this delusion——? She ought not to be allowed to go out of the family with such a notion in her mind."

"Frederick, I am afraid you will be annoyed," said poor Mrs. Eastwood, "I was very much distressed myself. She—told him everything;—though, indeed, if they are to be married, it was indispensable that he should know——"

Frederick almost foamed at the mouth with rage and vexation. He refused to believe that Innocent could have done anything of the kind of her own initiative,—he insisted that some one had suggested it, that she had been frightened,—that the idea had been put into her mind. After the improvement and amelioration of his manners, to which they had been gradually getting accustomed, he went to the very farthest bound of their endurance. He would be no party to the arrangement, he declared,—they might carry it out if they would, but without him. Frederick, indeed, was stung to the quick by what seemed to him the most manifold and most complicated invasion of his rights. Innocent had been his slave since ever he knew her, and she was to be taken from him,—and the secret of her delusion, or whatever it was, was exposed to a stranger. His wife's death, and Innocent's connexion with it, whatever that might be, all talked of, discussed, pulled to pieces by others! I think Frederick had some ground for general irritation, though he had no right to blame any one individually; he was very sore and very angry at this revolution of affairs; he had begun to think that Innocent was very pretty and sweet, and that he might reward her for her devotion to him, when lo, there came, first this story about Amanda's death, and then Innocent's sudden, unaccountable throwing of herself into Longueville's arms! By degrees he became less sore, and began to think that he understood the latter incident, and Innocent, feeling what a great gulf lay between them now, now that he knew what had happened, had fled to Sir Alexis from her own despair and his. This made him less sore, but not less sorry. He had been conscious that he must think of her no more when he heard her revelation on the previous night, but as soon as further thinking of her was useless, he felt that the revelation she had made was nothing,—that it was indeed mere delusion, as his mother said, and that Innocent, once removed out of his reach, became the thing he most longed *for* in the world. Altogether, that night brought

him little comfort. He was impatient, unhappy, irritable, nay furious; and, naturally, his fury fixed upon those who deserved it least,—upon his mother and sister, who were absolutely innocent, and upon Sir Alexis, who had been brought into the matter by appeal, without any action of his. It was some days after this before he could even secure a chance of speaking to Innocent alone. They kept her from him watchfully, yet so naturally, that much as he chafed, he could say nothing,—and Longueville was there in the evenings, filling him with suppressed rage. At last fortune favoured him, and he found her for a few minutes alone.

"Innocent," he said, "I fear you are going to take a very foolish step. Who has advised you to do it? You ought not to marry Longueville,—a man whom you cannot care for,—a man so much older than yourself."

Innocent shrank from him into the corner of the sofa where she was sitting. She made no answer,—but she shrank unquestionably, which made him more angry still.

"You are very foolish,—because you have been unhappy, you determine to be more unhappy, to leave no way of escape for yourself. If you marry that man you can have no sympathy with him. He is older than your father. Was there no one else in the world to help you, Innocent, that you should have referred to him?"

"Do not be angry," sighed Innocent, softly, turning upon him her anxious, deprecating eyes. "No one else offered to help me. He is very kind——"

"Oh, kind!" cried Frederick, "is any one unkind? When you say such a thing you accuse us all. Surely I could have helped you better than Longueville——"

"Not you, Frederick," said the girl. She did not withdraw her eyes from him, but a faint flush came upon her face.

"Why not I? You are thinking of this business about—my wife. That was no reason why you should turn from me. Innocent, be wise in time, and give this man up."

He did not remember that she too had suggested to him to give up his marriage, with more simplicity, but not less unreasonableness. She shook her head half-sadly, half-smiling. She had no wish to marry Sir Alexis. The thought, indeed, filled her with vague alarm when it occurred to her. But he had taken her burden on his shoulders,—he had promised to set it right. And Innocent, not asking any questions, had been able to believe him. Such help no one else in the world had offered her. It seemed the only thing she understood or cared for in her life.

Thus the time stole away,—the interval between this rapid settlement of affairs and the marriage-day, which was so strangely *unlike* other marriage-days. Innocent had her *trousseau* prepared *like* other brides, and The Elms was full of the excitement *of the* preparations. I am not even sure, notwithstanding all

the circumstances involved which tempered the pleasure, that Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly did not derive a certain enjoyment from choosing her dresses, and buying her "things," and deciding how this and that was to be made. She was passive herself, and took little interest in what was going on, but she was a very patient lay figure in their hands, suffering draperies of all sorts to be tried upon her, without active rebellion. The other ladies had the satisfaction of artists in dressing Innocent. She had never been "dressed" before, and to get her up as Lady Longueville ought to be got up, was a delightful exercise of skill and ingenuity. Men, no doubt, have other solacements of a like character,—but one requires to be a woman to understand the genuine, simple, and natural pleasures which Nelly Eastwood, though her heart was sore, and her mind full of a thousand anxieties, got out of her cousin's *trousseau*. To try how one thing after another would look upon Innocent, to see which shade, which fashion would become her best, to fit her out, in short, for her new position, according to their own ideal of what that position was, amused the mother and daughter as few other things could have done, and distracted them from their own cares. If you despise Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly for this, my dear reader, I do not agree with you. The marriage itself was one in which they had no responsibility. They had not been consulted in it—it was Innocent's own doing,—and considering all the circumstances, and the peculiarity of Innocent's character, it was, to Mrs. Eastwood at least, as she said, "a matter of great thankfulness," that Innocent had selected for herself so efficient a protector, so kind a guardian as Sir Alexis. "He will give her everything that this world can give," Mrs. Eastwood said, addressing an indignation meeting of her own two younger boys which had been hastily convened on the occasion. "He is very fond of her, and will consider her happiness in everything. He is an old friend of the family, and it need not trouble us to know that he is acquainted with all our circumstances." This last remark was intended for Frederick, who stood sullenly at the window, turning his back upon the others, with his figure relieved against the light.

"Our circumstances?" said Jenny. "Is there anything in our circumstances that may not be known to all the world?"

"That is all very well, mother," cried Dick, who was less observant, "but I don't know how you can make up your mind to give Innocent to an old fogie like Longueville. He looks a hundred and fifty. He has old ways of thinking, old habits; in short, he is an old fogie, neither more nor less, and she is eighteen. It is the sort of thing one reads of in novels. Such things don't happen in real life——"

"My dear boy—" began Mrs. Eastwood.

"At least they oughtn't to," said Dick, "and as for its being Innocent's own choice, what does she know about it? She has been

talked over. She has been seduced by all that trash of dresses and finery——"

Dick had spent half the precious morning helping to decide between a blue silk and a green one, and he was naturally wrathful (after it was over) at that loss of his valuable time.

"Innocent doesn't care for that sort of thing," said Jenny. "Has some one been hard upon her? has some one worried her? I don't know what my mother means about our circumstances. I thought Innocent was to get the same as the rest of us. She may have my share, if that will keep her from marrying old Longueville. I don't see why she should want to marry any one;—*I* don't."

"How can I explain it to you?" said poor Mrs. Eastwood; "a girl is not like a young man. If anything was to happen to me, what would become of Innocent?—who would take care of her? You, or you? Dick, who is going to India, or Jenny who has his own way to make in the world,—or Nelly? Nelly will have some one else to consult——"

"You seem to put me out of the question altogether," said Frederick, "though it seems to me I have a right to be considered——"

"You!—oh, Frederick!—when you know how impossible, how out of all question that would be—— But Innocent has put it out of my hands, she has chosen Sir Alexis herself,—and when I think how much more he can give her than I ever could,—what advantages—what means of developing——"

"The fact is, women are all mercenary," said Frederick, "they cannot help it. Money carries the day with them, whatever may be the drawbacks. I have long known it. Innocent is simple enough in other things, but in this she is like all the rest."

And thus the family conclave broke up, even Jenny, who was his mother's champion, being unable to see his way to her defence in this particular. Dick gave up the question with more light-heartedness, being unaffected by theories, but Jenny went back to Oxford somewhat melancholy, wondering if indeed "all women" were to be condemned wholesale, or whether there would be any other meaning in the allusion to the circumstances which could be trusted to Sir Alexis. What these circumstances were, and the special mystery which enveloped poor Innocent, neither of the boys knew.

The effect, however, upon the world at large was very different. In the opinion of the Molyneuxes, for instance, Mrs. Eastwood rose to a far higher degree of estimation than they had ever bestowed upon her before. They even thought it might be as well that Ernest should be "settled," now that things had taken this turn. Nelly was not a bad match, all things considered, and to be married would probably settle Ernest, and the connexion was good. Besides, when the mother had done so well for her niece, a poor girl whom she had "shamefully neglected," what might she not aspire to for

her daughter? I do not know that Ernest was stimulated in distinct words by these sentiments—but such feelings convey themselves otherwise than by words—and the conviction came to his mind also that now was the moment to conclude his long probation, as he now chose to call it. "Don't you think I have been kept hanging on and waiting long enough?" he said to Nelly, whom he found immersed in Innocent's business, one morning, when, contrary to his habit, and very unexpectedly to them all, he sauntered into the drawing-room at The Elms.

"Kept hanging on?" said Nelly, with a surprise she did not attempt to conceal.

"Of course, you don't suppose it is of my own will that I have waited for you like this,—almost as long as Jacob, eh, Nelly?—longer, I should say, considering how much faster things go now-a-days——"

"I did not know that you had ever tried to shorten it," said Nelly slowly, growing very red.

"I don't pretend to be able to subdue circumstances," said Molyneux; "we are all the victims of them, and I as much as other men. But it seems to me, Nelly, that now's our chance; now that Frederick has been providentially released from his encumbrance, and that your mother has made this triumphant stroke, and booked old Longueville for Innocent——"

"Ernest! I will not permit such words——"

"Well, well, don't let us quarrel about the words—now that Sir Alexis is about to be made happy with the hand, &c. By Jove, you may say what you like, Nelly, but it is the cleverest *coup* I have heard of for a very long time. Altogether the family is in luck; and if you play your cards well, and we can get hold of your mother when she is in a good humour——"

Poor Nelly's endurance had been greatly tried. Her troubles which she dared not confide to her lover—the sense that he could not be trusted to enter into the closer circle of her family anxieties, and consequently that his sympathy with herself could never be complete—had long been gnawing at her heart and embittering all his careless words and irreverent thoughts. She turned red and then pale, tremulous and then rigid, in the passionate tumult of feeling which took possession of her; but she kept herself calm with all her might, and answered him with an artificial coldness which filled Molyneux half with ridicule, half with dismay.

"How am I to play my cards?" she said, "and what is it that you mean to ask from my mother when she is in a good humour?"

"Nelly!" he said, half laughing, half angry, "what does this tragedy-queen air portend? surely it is a little late to get on stilts with me. Of course you know as well as I do what I have to propose to your mother. We can't marry without her help; the responsibility lies upon her of keeping you from being settled and

done for—I and my people are ready enough. When I talk of playing your cards, I take it for granted you want our business to be decided as much as I do,—and the very first step for us is to know how much she means to do."

"I look at it in a different way," said Nelly, plunging desperately into the centre of the question which she had so long avoided. "Ernest, now we must understand each other at last; I will not have any such proposal made to mamma. I will not!—it does not matter what you say. If we cannot do with what we have and your profession, it is better to put an end to it altogether. I have not wished for anything, nor thought of anything beyond what we could afford," cried Nelly suddenly, the tears coming in spite of her,—"but I will not take our living from mamma!"

Molyneux was thunderstruck. "Why, Nelly!" he said, in the half-derisive, half-affectionate tone which had so often disarmed her, "you innocent little goose!" and he drew her within his arm. But Nelly was wrought to a point which did not admit of this treatment. She withdrew from his clasp, and stood fronting him, tears in her eyes, but resolution in her face.

"We must understand each other," she cried. "I have long tried to say it. Now I have had courage to speak, and I cannot go back. I will live as poorly as you like—if you like; but I will not fight with my own mother for money; I will not take our living from hers; I am determined. But I must not bind you," she added, faltering slightly, "if you think otherwise. If you think otherwise—if there is no other alternative—Ernest, I must set you free——"

"To speak to your mother?" he said, with a laugh in which there was some relief. "I should have done it without all this declamation, Nelly."

"No,—but to be free from me," said Nelly, folding closely together the hands which he tried to take.

CHAPTER XLI.

AN UNPOPULAR WEDDING.

THE marriage of Innocent took place on one of the first days of February, a day of the "seasonable" kind, with black skies, a dark gray atmosphere, and occasional downpours of steady rain. The raw cold penetrated to one's bones and one's heart, and even the show of costly flowers which had been procured for the occasion

failed to make the rooms look cheerful. Innocent herself, in her white bridal dress and veil, was like the snowdrops. Her head drooped a little, her cheeks were not much less pale than her dress. She was not a blushing, or a smiling, or a weeping bride. Her eyes were full of a certain awe, sometimes varied by alarm, when the prospect of leaving home came uppermost; but she was passive in all things, gentle and grateful, as calm in her new position as she had been in the former. The only one thing she had been anxious about, the one trouble and mystery in her life, had been set right (as she thought) by her bridegroom's exertions. He had taken upon him to arrange all that: to explain it, to make everything clear; and Innocent, trustful and ignorant, had not doubted his power to do so. Mrs. Eastwood's anxious assurances that she was mistaken, that her belief about Amanda was a delusion, had never made any impression on the girl. But when Sir Alexis accepted her story as true, and pledged himself to set everything right, the practical part of her mind, which was in reality the only intellectual part of her which had any power, accepted his assurances, and trusted in them. Why should any one bid her believe that it was a delusion? Innocent knew that it was no delusion; but at the same time she was quite simple enough and foolish to believe that Sir Alexis could set it all to rights, without inquiring how. He would give her a caressing answer when she asked him about it, and tell her that all was being settled; and in her ignorance she believed him, and was lightened of her burden. The wedding was to be a very quiet one, partly (as it was announced) because of Innocent's health—partly because of the mourning of the family. John Vane, who had been summoned for the occasion, was to give her away as the representative of her father's family—for Frederick, morose and melancholy (feeling the death of his wife, poor fellow—for she was very beautiful, though it was quite a *mésalliance*), would have nothing to do with it. And a few of Mrs. Eastwood's friends and counsellors were in attendance, and two or three friends of Sir Alexis; but it was not a gay ceremonial. The Molyneuxes were present, for Ernest had not intimated to his family any doubt as to eventual union with Nelly, nor had he accepted her virtual dismissal of him; but they, like many other people, after having received the announcement of the marriage with enthusiasm, had come prepared at the last moment to criticize.

"How could she allow that poor child to marry such a man?" whispered Miss Molyneux to her mother.

"Hush, child!" said the mother; "the Eastwoods are people who will do anything for money."

"How pale she is; do you think they can have used force?" the same young lady asked of Ernest.

"No more force than that of wealth and finery—a force women are always glad to yield to," said Ernest, almost in Nelly's hearing.

She heard the last words, and divined the first. They had "made

up" their quarrel, as people say, but Nelly's heart was very sore, quivering with pain present and pain past. Even the marriage itself was nothing to be happy about. How would poor Innocent bear it, when she was gone, away from all who cared for her, with her old-new husband? How selfish it was of him, Nelly thought, to insist upon marrying Innocent because in her trouble she had committed herself to him!—but all men were now selfish; they were not to be judged as women are. It came natural to them to consider themselves, their own will, their own gratification before everything else. This conviction was the bitter product of Nelly's own experience, which she endeavoured to soften by generalization, as men and women do invariably on both sides. All men were like that, she said to herself; it took off something of the sharp edge of self-seeking from the man whom she had herself chosen from all the world—or rather, who had chosen her, as he himself would have preferred to have said.

John Vane did not come to her until the weary morning was nearly over, till after the bride and bridegroom had departed, and the other guests were dropping away. The guests in general had not been cheerful in their comments; most of them had expressed themselves warmly delighted at the prospect of so good a match for Innocent—but the compliments they paid to the mistress of the house now were not so agreeable.

"I am afraid poor little Lady Longueville is very delicate," said one, shaking her head.

"Everything has gone off very nicely," said another; "but I wish, poor thing, she had looked a little happier."

"I don't understand a bride looking very happy on her wedding day," said a more benevolent critic; "and she is so young and so—inexperienced——"

"He has plenty of experience for both," said a fourth.

"I should like to see that girl safe back from her wedding tour," said Mrs. Everard, who was privileged to speak her mind. "She looks to me a great deal too like a Lucia di Lammermoor, my dear. She wanted nothing but her hair down, and a confidant in white muslin. I hope he will take care of her."

"There can be no doubt that he will take every care of her," said Mrs. Eastwood, who was tired and irritated. "That was my great comfort in giving my consent."

"Well, at all events, the responsibility is off your hands," said Mrs. Everard, nodding her head half in congratulation, half in pity.

Thus the marriage was set down on all hands as a mercenary match made by Mrs. Eastwood, of which poor Innocent was the victim. Her very sons thought so; and with better reason John Vane thought so, whom she had thought of as her counsellor, and whose moral support would have done her good. But how was he to judge, except as other people did, from the surface? and Mrs.

Eastwood felt that she must bear it all, and dared not say anything in her own defence. John Vane was cold and grave even to Nelly. He seemed to intend to go away without speaking to any one beyond the ordinary civilities; but something in Nelly's face seemed to bring him back from the door, when he had all but taken his leave. He approached her reluctantly, she thought, and his manner was not as of old. He told her he was sorry he had not known of this sooner —that it must all have been arranged very suddenly—and that he would have been glad to have been consulted about a matter so important to his poor little cousin's happiness.

"We should have liked more time, too," said Nelly, in her turn indignant; "but Innocent settled it all by herself, and Sir Alexis insisted that there should be no delay."

"Innocent settled it all by herself?"

"Yes, Mr. Vane; it looks very strange, but it is true. I see you blame poor mamma, who never was a matchmaker in her life; but it was Innocent who settled everything. I hate it," said Nelly, with warmth; "and when she sees what she has done—poor Innocent! But he is a kind man," she added, more calmly, "and he will be very good to her, as mamma says."

"I do not understand Innocent," said Vane. "They told me a very strange story at Sterborne——"

"A story—about what?" said Nelly, growing breathless with excitement and terror.

"She seems to have gone home in so strange a way, so suddenly, so oddly altogether," he said, with an uneasy look. "And yet she is not *really* an idiot—only odd. I am very sorry for my sister's sake —it has disturbed her so much. Indeed, I often regret deeply that I took Innocent to the High Lodge."

"Oh, if you had not done so!" cried Nelly, with that horrible perception of how a whole world of trouble might have been avoided, which comes so often after the event. "Oh, if you had not done it!" Then she restrained herself, as he could see, with a sudden movement of alarm.

"There is something behind that I do not know," said Vane, looking at her.

"Oh, no, no, pray don't think so! She was frightened and nervous: that was all," cried Nelly.

How she longed to tell him, to set him right in his injurious opinion, to vindicate her mother and herself! Few of the only denials of life are equal to this, when men or women are compelled by honour to abandon their honour to public comment, and to accept blame which is not justly theirs. Vane looked at her curiously, even with something like anxiety; but he remained silent. He was confounded by all that had happened, and offended by the complete want of confidence shown by them. And what could he say beyond what had been said?—that Innocent had been permitted, or perhaps

induced—forced, the bolder spirits said—into a mercenary match which she did not wish; which she was passive in, if not less than passive? Vane stood silently by Nelly's side, for some time, wondering, trying to think what the secret could be—what extenuating circumstances might exist. At least, he concluded to himself, Nelly could not be to blame. She could have nothing to do with the matter; one young girl would not help to force another on that painful road. Nelly, at the worst, must have been herself passive—perhaps she was herself fated to be the next victim. Vane watched curiously the greetings between her and the Molyneuxes, as this thought passed through his mind. The *aigre-doux* of their salutations was unchanged; they were not warmer than before, nor more familiar; it was evident that no change had taken place, there, in the position of affairs. He thought it was evident (looking again at Nelly herself) that she was not more happy than she had been. Why had not Mrs. Eastwood exerted herself to further her daughter's prospects, instead of thus fatally deciding poor Innocent's? He went away at last with his mind in a very uncomfortable state; grieved for Innocent, troubled about Nelly, wondering and confused altogether. The only thing he was sure of was another generalization, such as in all similar cases men find it safe to take refuge in—that it must be the mother's fault. She it was who must have "managed" and schemed for the one gilded unhappiness, and who must be permitting, for her own ends, the other. Poor Mrs. Eastwood! this was all the reward she got for her much anxiety and motherly care.

Another incident had occurred a few days before, which she had confided to no one but Nelly, and which had seriously disturbed her. Jane the housemaid, whose quiet demeanour had lulled all her fears to rest, had come to her suddenly, and demanded to be promoted to the post of lady's maid to the future Lady Longueville.

"Lady's maid! you, Jane? but you don't understand the duties," Mrs. Eastwood had said in consternation.

"Oh, ma'am, I know a deal as no one thinks of," said Jane, significantly, with a look that froze the blood in her mistress's veins.

"That may be, perhaps," Mrs. Eastwood said, trying to cover her confusion with a nervous laugh; "but you do not know how to make dresses, or how to do hair—or any of a maid's special duties. Household work is a different sort of thing."

"My friends has told me to apply for the place," said Jane, "and them as knows thinks me well qualified. They say as how I have the best right. I knows a deal more than any one thinks for," the woman repeated doggedly, like a lesson she had learned by rote.

A swift calculation passed through Mrs. Eastwood's mind—was it better to keep this dangerous knowledge within her own reach, where she could prevent its evil use, or try to prevent it? or, on the other hand, would Jane be safer within the steady grasp of Sir Alexis, who would stand between Innocent and harm? It was a difficult

question to settle in a moment. Mrs. Eastwood leaped at the more generous decision; she took the burden on herself.

"I have no wish to part with you," she said, diplomatically; "but if you want to better yourself, to try another kind of place, I shall be glad to let you try how you can get on with Miss Ellinor at home. For Lady Longueville, I should like a person of more experience to begin with. You can speak to my daughter about it, if you please."

"But, ma'am," Jane was beginning, pertinaciously.

"No more just now—I am busy. After the wedding I shall have more time," said Mrs. Eastwood. But this interview gave her another ache in her heart.

All these things concurred to make the wedding day a painful one. As the family were in mourning, and as the wedding had been so quiet, they had excused themselves from any further festivities in the evening: and who does not know how dismal is the languid close of the day, when all is over, after the excitement of the morning, and of the busy days preceding, when there was so much to do? Dick sauntered about the garden with his wedding favour still on his coat, shedding bits of wedding-cake all over his path, which Winks, following at his heels, condescended to pick up, though Winks had not approved of the wedding any more than the rest of the family. Winks had never had any opinion of Sir Alexis. A connoisseur, fond of art, of dainty furniture, and fine gardens, has seldom much sympathy with the fourfooted visitor, whose appreciation of the finest collection is generally somewhat contemptuous, to say the least. Winks retired to a corner when Sir Alexis visited The Elms. He declined to take any notice of him. "He is not in my style," the little cynic said very plainly; and he retired from his usual leading part in the family life while this objectionable visitor remained. Other events that day had combined to derange Winks's temper, and wound him in his tenderest feelings. Mr. Justice Molyneux (for the Q.C. was now a Judge) had attempted to give him a kick in the hall, where Winks was contemplating the arrival of the guests with much dignity; Mrs. Everard had trodden on the flowing fringes of his tail; he had been hustled out of his favourite chair, and interfered with in all his usual habits. Winks was very tolerant when this sort of thing happened in the evening. He accepted the fact of a ball with a certain benevolent interest, and wagged his tail condescendingly at the young people, bidding them enjoy themselves, before he went off on three feet, like the philosopher he was, to enjoy tranquillity in the one comfortable chair in the library, congratulating himself that dogs do not dance. But a ball, or something like a ball, in the morning was a mystery to Winks. He thought he had got rid of all that crowd of unnecessary people when they went off to the church; but to see them come back in full daylight, not twelve o'clock, and fill the room once more, was beyond the endurance even of a philosopher. He was so far disturbed out of his ordinary calm as to bark

indignantly when the bride and bridegroom went away, and a few of the livelier spirits in the party, headed by Dick, threw old shoes after them. Winks read Dick a lecture on the subject afterwards. He looked at him with a mixture of reproach and contempt, as he stood in the hall, with his hands full of old slippers. He was too much disgusted even to follow his young master back into the house when the carriage drove away, but shook his head and marched off round the side walk into the garden, feeling that such absurdity was not to be borne. I cannot quite explain how it was that he condescended to pick up the bits of wedding-cake; perhaps with a thrifty idea that it was best they should not be lost; or perhaps he was satisfied that Dick was ashamed of himself, and saw the familiar book in his pocket which was Dick's signal-flag and intimation to all concerned that he had returned to the duties of ordinary life.

"It was fun, though, by Jove, to see that old slipper with the high heel hit Longueville on his old nose," Dick said with a laugh, as he held up a larger bit of cake than usual; and Winks, mollified, grinned in acknowledgment of the joke. He made one round of the garden after the cake was finished, to show that he was not mercenary, and then trotted indoors, where, providentially, all was now quiet. The family were assembled in the drawing-room, where, though the chairs and tables had been put in their usual places, there was still an air of excitement, and a sentiment of disorder. Winks came in and set himself down in front of the fire, and looked at them all. "What do you think of your handiwork now it is finished?" he seemed to say, severely, looking at his mistress, curling up one black lip over his white teeth; he would not condescend to wag his tail.

"Oh, Winks, don't look so diabolical," said Nelly, trying to laugh; perhaps it was as good a way of relieving her feelings as crying would have been.

"Don't sneer, you brute!" cried Jenny, indignant. Winks fixed upon them all a look of contemptuous disapproval, and then trotted off to a chair at the window. They were not even amusing in their exhaustion—he preferred his own company to theirs.

After a while Jenny followed Winks's example.

"What a bore a wedding is," he said, stretching himself, "in the morning, leaving one's afternoon on one's hands. I shall go out for a walk till dinner."

"Don't go out in the rain with your cold, dear," said Mrs. Eastwood.

"Pshaw! what's a cold?" said Jenny. The rain was nothing to the chill discouragement and inarticulate vague misery which seemed to fill the house from garret to basement. A sense of unhappiness, which he did not know how to struggle against, was in Jenny's own mind. Nothing uncomfortable had happened to him in his personal career. He had pleasant rooms, was in a good set, and fortune

smiled upon him. Nevertheless he too was dully miserable, as the house was; he did not know why. He was too young for sentiment, or, at least, too boyish and defiant of sentiment, to take himself to task in the matter, or ascertain what ailed him. Perhaps even the boy was wise enough not to wish to come to any clear conclusion in the matter; but he was dull, dull as ditchwater, according to his own simile.

They were all going to a dance at Mrs. Barclay's that night, which was some relief. She was full of triumph and exultation in the event which had brought so little comfort to the Eastwoods. She had asked everybody—the Molyneuxes, who were to be "connexions," through Nelly, and John Vane, who was already her "connexion," through Innocent—and all the *habitués* of the Elms. Jenny spent the time till dinner in a wretched walk, and came in drenched, with his cold considerably increased, which, on the whole, he was rather glad of; and Mrs. Eastwood, yielding to the general misery of the circumstances at last, went "to lie down"—an indulgence unknown to her on ordinary occcasions. Dick went to his own room, where Winks, on being whistled for five times, condescended to follow him; and they two, I think, had the best of it. Frederick had sole possession of the library, where he sat over the fire with his feet on the grate, and a countenance which was dark as the sky. And Nelly went to poor Innocent's room and put things tidy with her own hands, and cried over the little empty white bed, as if Innocent had died. A wretched day, rain outside, cold, dulness, and misery within; but if people will marry in February, what else can be looked for? for the home of the bride is seldom a very cheerful habitation on the evening of the wedding day.

CHAPTER XLII

AFTER THE WEDDING.

THE ball at Mrs. Barclay's was brilliant, and the Eastwood family were, as was natural, the most honoured guests. And I suppose that Nelly and her brothers, being young, enjoyed themselves, as the phrase is, and were able to cast off their melancholy. Dick at least was perfectly able to cast it off, the more especially as he met the reigning lady of his affections—the girl whom he had many thoughts of asking to go out with him to India—thoughts which were tempered by the wholesome fear of having his proposal treated with much contumely as a boy's fancy at home. He danced with her half the evening, and sat out with her on the crowded staircase.

and consumed much ice and lemonade in her company, and was very happy. Jenny, who had not been properly looked after in his dancing when he was young, and was very doubtful of his own steadiness in a waltz, stalked about the rooms and talked to the people he knew, and said it was a great bore, yet was vaguely exhilarated, as one is when under twenty, by the crowd, and the lights, and the music. Frederick, of course, being still in the first gloom of his widowhood, did not come. And, as for Nelly, though she expected nothing but to be miserable, she, too, found the evening pass off much less disagreeably than she anticipated. Molyneux, somewhat frightened by the decided stand she had made, and piqued by the possibility of rejection after all, was more constantly at her side than he had been since the early days of their engagement; and Vane, looking more friendly than in the morning, asked her to dance with him, on purpose it would seem to make up for his former coldness. He kept aloof from Mrs. Eastwood, but he sought Nelly. "If you will accept so poor a partner," he said; "my dancing days are about over."

"I do not see why that should be," said Nelly, looking brightly up at him, pleased to hear his voice soften into its old tone.

"Ah, pardon, I do," he said, with a smile, "I am growing old. I shall go and set up a monkery one of these days beside my sister's nunnery. I am not like Longueville; no means are afforded to me of renewing my youth."

"But you are not old, like Sir Alexis," cried Nelly.

"Not like Sir Alexis; but old—tolerably old in years—a great deal older in heart."

"Oh, how wrong you are!" said Nelly; "on the contrary, you are young. I am a bystander, and I can see better than you can. You are a great deal younger than many who are—not so old as you are." Her eyes went wandering over the room as she spoke, and John Vane made out in his own mind that she was looking for Molyneux—a thing which I cannot take upon me to affirm.

"You give me consolation," he said, shaking his head; "and, indeed, I am young enough to be very foolish, and as curious as a child. I wonder now—you are honest, Miss Eastwood, and say what you think—I wonder if you would tell me the real cause of poor little Innocent's marriage, and all her odd ways?"

Nelly's countenance changed in spite of herself, and in her mind there rose a painful debate. Should she make him some conventional answer, evading his question? or should she answer him in sincerity? After all, she could harm no one by honesty, though it would make her answer unsatisfactory. She looked at him gravely, trying to frame her reply so as to reveal nothing; and then *the natural* honesty to which he had appealed gained the upper *hand.*

"*Mr. Vane,*" she said, hurriedly, "if I tell you that I cannot tell

you, will you be satisfied? It is a strange way to answer, perhaps, but I cannot do any more. Perhaps some time—but just now I cannot. There is a reason," she said, growing more agitated. "Oh, please do not take advantage of my wish to tell you, and make me say more."

"Do you wish to tell me?" he said, touched in spite of all his prejudices.

"Yes," she cried, "and so did mamma. If we could but have seen you before she went to Sir Alexis; you were the first person we thought of; we have always felt we could trust you. Ah, don't make me say any more!"

"I will not," he said gravely. The anxious appeal in her face filled John Vane with many feelings, the foremost of which perhaps did not concern Innocent. "Confound the fellow!" he said within himself, as he had done many times before; and it was not Longueville he meant. They were silent for the rest of the dance through which this very serious conversation ran, but Nelly felt that the cloud between herself and her friend had passed away. He was a true friend, more to be trusted perhaps than—some others who were really more important in her life. Nelly reflected to herself that after all this serious position of counsellor if possible—of sympathizer when counsel was not possible—was rather a friend's place than a lover's. A lover (said Nelly to herself) is less concerned with your family and affairs, and more with you. He wants you to enter into his concerns, not he into yours; he is more fond of you, and therefore more exacting. It is you—you—he wants. He thinks nothing of so much importance as to have you to himself. This thought brought a blush upon her cheek, and some small degree of momentary comfort to her heart. It was flattering, at least—for passion is at all times a better excuse than indifference. But John Vane saw clearly, with eyes unblinded by passion—he was clear-sighted enough to see that something was wrong, and being a good kind friend only, not a lover, tried to show his sympathy, and to help if that should be possible. In this point of view a friend might be more satisfactory—more consolatory than a lover; but still friendship and love were very different things. This was the argument that went through Nelly's mind in the frivolous atmosphere of the ballroom, and while she was dancing with some indifferent person who was neither friend nor lover. "Yes, the rooms are very pretty, Mrs. Barclay has a great deal of taste," she said, through the midst of her thoughts. "She is very nice indeed, always good-natured and kind. The Longuevilles are coming back for the season to their house in Kensington. They will not go to Italy till next winter." This kind of prattle can go on very easily on the surface of much graver thoughts.

"What were you talking to John Vane about?" said Ernest, when his turn came.

"About Innocent," said Nelly, quietly.

"About Innocent! It must be very pleasant to have such an interesting subject. You looked as if your whole hearts were in it —he asking and you replying. An indifferent spectator might have thought the subject of discussion more personal," said Molyneux, with an angry countenance.

"Innocent is very interesting to me," said Nelly, with spirit, "and also to Mr. Vane. Though you do not care for her, Ernest, that is not to say that I must become indifferent to my cousin. She has need of her friends, poor child!"

"Poor child!" said Ernest, "I like that. She has just made one of the best matches going, and got herself established as very few girls do, I can tell you. She has carried her innocence to an excellent market, Nelly. I don't see why her fortunes should call forth so much sympathetic discussion, especially between you and John Vane. I detest the fellow, putting himself forward on all occasions. Who wants his interference, I should like to know?"

"I do!" cried Nelly, bravely, "and so does mamma. He is the only one of her relations who has taken any interest in Innocent. We should both be distressed beyond measure if he did not interfere."

"Confound Innocent!" said Molyneux, under his breath. "Why there should be all this fuss about a half-witted girl is more than I can say; especially now, when she is off your mother's hands, Nelly. Our own affairs are more interesting to me."

"Yes, clearly," Nelly said to herself, "a lover is very different. What he wants is to have you to himself, not necessarily to please *you*," but she suppressed the retort which rose to her lips. She had no desire, however, to prolong her dance, or to go out to the conservatory, or even the staircase, where Dick was in Elysium, and which she herself on other occasions had found very pleasant. "I would rather go to mamma," she said. "We are both tired, and I think we must go early. A wedding is a very fatiguing business."

"A wedding is a very tiresome business, especially if one never hears the end of it," said Ernest, and he left Nelly by her mother's side with considerable dudgeon. Though poor Nelly had explained it all to herself so philosophically, and had even felt herself flattered by her own definition of the peculiarities of a lover, she could have cried as she sat down by her mother. She was prettily dressed, and her eyes were bright, and altogether her aspect was such as to justify Mrs. Barclay's plaudits, who declared her, if not the prettiest, at least one of the very prettiest girls present; but if she could have cried with vexation and mortification and chill disappointment, it *would have* done her all the good in the world. Instead of crying, *however, she had* to smile, and to look pleased when Mrs. Barclay *brought some* new piece of emptiness up to her with a simper on its

countenance and a flower in its coat. "You must not really go yet. I cannot have Nelly carried off in the midst of the fun," said Mrs. Barclay, "how can you be so hard-hearted?" and Nelly's mother had to smile too, and yield. Such things, I suppose, will happen at balls everywhere, now and then, till the end of the world.

After this great event there followed another lull—a lull of strange calm and quiet, almost incomprehensible to the family after the curious interval of suppressed excitement through which they had passed, and which seemed to have made an atmosphere of secrecy and mystery congenial to them. Jenny returned to Oxford; Dick, who was approaching his final examination, was once more kept to his work by every one in the house with a zeal which his mother, who began now to feel the separation approaching, felt almost cruel, though, moved by stern force of duty, she herself was foremost in the effort. The only comfort in the matter Dick himself felt was, that after this there would be no more Exams.—a fond hope in which, as the better-instructed reader knows, a Competition Wallah, with all the horrors of Tamil and Telugu before him, would soon discover himself to be disappointed. In the meantime an additional torment was added to him, in being recommended by everybody who "took an interest" in his success, to read books about India in the few leisure hours which hitherto had been dissipated by the aid of Mr. Mudie. Dick did not object to "Tara: a Mahratta Tale;" but he kicked at the history and travels in India which Mrs. Everard disinterred from her shelves for his benefit. "I shall make out all about it when I get there," he said, piteously. "Why should a fellow be compelled to remember every hour of the day that he is going to India? I shan't have home so very much longer. You may let me have a little peace as long as I am here." At this speech the tears would mount to Mrs. Eastwood's eyes, and Winks would come down from his favourite chair, and place himself before Dick, and wag his tail sympathetically. When Dick continued—"Confound India! I wish it was at the bottom of the sea," Winks sat up solemnly and waved his feathery forepaws at his young master. What he meant by this last proceeding—whether to entreat him not to be too pathetic, or to mock satirically at his self-pity—no one knew; there are moments of mystery in all characters of any depth; some men are angry when they are in trouble—some fictitiously gay when they are angry. All that can be said is, that Winks expressed his feelings thus when his sympathy got beyond the reach of ordinary expression, and the effect upon Dick, at least, was always soothing and consolatory. "I won't, old fellow, since you make such a point of it," he would say; and then Mrs. Eastwood would laugh to hide her crying. In this way Winks found his way to the very depths of their hearts, becoming a creature of domestic emotion, half humorous, yet all-penetrating in its pathos.

Other matters, too, besides Dick's training began to ripen towards

a crisis. Mr. Justice Molyneux had, as has been said, gained that elevation which all his friends had foreseen for him, and the family had proportionally risen in importance, and it had become a matter of general remark among the friends of both parties that the engagement between Nelly and Ernest had lasted quite long enough. "What are they waiting for?" everybody said. Most people had a high opinion of the young man's powers, if he could only be prevailed upon to set to work. His articles in the *Piccadilly* were a proof that he could express himself as forcibly and much more elegantly than his father, who in his day had been a perfect master of the British jury, and whose summings-up were now cited as models of clear-headedness—not elegant—the judge had never gone in for elegance—but forcible and clear in the highest degree. The son of such a father, with the powers which Ernest was known to possess, and with all the advantages derived from his position, could not fail to have a fine career before him. "What are they waiting for?" Mr. Parchemin, who was Mrs. Eastwood's financial adviser, one day took upon him to say. "These long engagements are always doubtful things, but sometimes there may be occasion for them—a clergyman, for instance. But in this case there seems no reason. You must pardon me for my plain speaking, as I have always taken an interest in Nelly. But what are they waiting for?"

"I suppose," said Mrs. Eastwood, who was sore on this subject, "till Mr. Molyneux has fairly entered upon his career."

"His career! My dear madam, a career does not come to such a man. He must go and look after it," said Mr. Parchemin. "I should have offered my services—any little interest I have with the solicitors—long ago, if I had not thought it quite unnecessary in the cause of his father's son."

"I am afraid I cannot interfere," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I don't wish to get rid of my daughter."

"But, my dear madam, you prefer her being comfortably settled, I suppose," said the financial counsellor. And, indeed, he expressed the opinions of all Mrs. Eastwood's advisers. Mrs. Everard was still more decided and emphatic. "I should speak to him, and ask him what he means," she said; "I should not put up with any shilly-shally. Nelly's happiness ought to be a great deal more to you than any nonsensical scruples of delicacy. I should ask him what he means."

"I do not hold Nelly so cheap," cried Mrs. Eastwood, with a little flush of anger. "I think the best man in the world is not too good for Nelly. And he ought to ask her from me, not compel me to thrust her upon him. No, not if he was the only man in the world!"

"*For my* part I should not be so scrupulous," said Mrs. Everard; "*I would not* stand on my dignity when my child's happiness was

involved. If Nelly likes him she should have him—or I would know the reason why!"

"One can only act according to one's nature," said Mrs. Eastwood, less amenable than usual to her friend's persuasions. But the fact that everybody did remark and wonder made her doubly angry with herself and every one. Ought she to have offered sacrifices on her own part to secure, as was the phrase, her child's happiness? Ought she to have taken the initiative without thus waiting, with a sense of proud repugnance, for the "other side"? Was she risking Nelly's happiness? These questions Mrs. Eastwood asked herself with a troubled heart. Nelly meanwhile went on tranquilly with her usual life, and made no sign. Sometimes she would redden, sometimes grow pale, when Ernest came as usual. He came always, but not so regularly as of old, and it seemed to Mrs. Eastwood that Nelly's expectations of his coming were not always pleasant. She was as quick to recognize his ring at the door, and to know his step, as ever, but no flush of joy came upon her face when she heard them. Quite as often a line of embarrassment, of anxiety, of incipient pain appeared on her forehead. The long engagement, was it?—or something else? Certainly, as day by day went on, Nelly grew more and more like one who drags a lengthening chain.

Jane, the housemaid, the most insignificant member of the household, became also at this time an embarrassment and trouble. With a strong desire to keep everything quiet, and hope that it might be accomplished, Mrs. Eastwood had recommended Nelly to make experiment of her powers as lady's maid; and Nelly, half reluctant, had consented. "I hear you want to try another kind of situation," Nelly said to her. "Come and help me while I dress, and then I shall be able to tell mamma what you can do."

"It ain't that I want another sort of situation—I want to be maid to my lady," said Jane.

"Well, it would be much finer, of course, than being maid to me," said Nelly, laughing; "but you had better try your skill on me first. If we come to grief, it will not be of so much consequence." This she said merrily, being less impressed than her mother was, and much less than the young woman herself was, with Jane's harm-doing powers.

"That ain't my meaning, miss," said Jane, very solemnly; "I mightn't know enough for you, but I knows plenty for my lady. It's a different thing. My friends all tell me as it's my own fault if my fortune's not made. I knows enough for my Lady Longueville—ay, and more than enough, if all was said."

"It seems to me you are rather impertinent," said Nelly, reddening. "I don't know what you mean by it. I will take you on trial if you like, because mamma wishes it; but Lady Longueville, you

may be sure, will not have you, unless you give proof of your knowledge more satisfactory than words."

"Oh, there's sometimes a deal of use in words, miss," said Jane, oracularly. Nelly went down-stairs fuming to her mother, demanding that she should be sent away.

"Send away Jane! Nelly, you are crazy. I might have let her go with Innocent, trusting that Sir Alexis would be able to manage her; but otherwise she must stay under my own eye. Think, Nelly, what she knows! She heard what Innocent said, every word."

"She is very impertinent," said Nelly. "If you keep her she will grow more and more so, and one day or other she will do the worst she can. Why should you pay any attention to her? Send her away, and let her do her worst!"

"Not for the world!" cried her mother. They had an argument about it which almost came to a quarrel; but the result was that Nelly was vanquished, and Jane stayed.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE GATHERING OF THE STORM.

SOME time after the above events, Frederick's little house in Mayfair—which had been the only advantage poor Amanda had gained by marrying him, and which had been furnished according to her taste, in a somewhat showy, modern fashion, with dashes of ill-considered and ill-fitting antiquity—became vacant. The tenant who had taken it for the winter months gave it up at the end of February: as it had proved a somewhat profitable investment, Frederick, who had a lease of the house, decided on letting it again, furnished. A little more money is never a matter of indifference to a young man with expensive tastes, and he was very willing to add to his income in this way. Before the house was let again, however, it was necessary that all the personal lumber Mrs. Frederick had left behind her should be cleared away. Her trunks, which had been placed in one locked-up room, her knick-knacks, the trifles with which she had filled her drawing-room, had to be put in order, and either restored to their places or distributed to her friends. Frederick found his mother and sister quite adverse to the office of looking over Amanda's "things." Her clothes and her finery were objects in which they took no interest, except the pitiful *and painful* one which now encompassed everything she had *possessed.* But they would neither accept this melancholy, tawdry

inheritance which she had left behind her, for themselves, nor did they feel any inclination to take upon them the office of arbitrators and distributors among her friends. He sent for Aunty in his perplexity from Sterborne. He had sworn to have nothing to do with the family henceforward, but in this strait he did not hesitate. Aunty came up to London on his application, almost by return of post. The dead woman's finery was all interesting to her. She had a pleasure in trying it on, in estimating its value, in selecting some for herself, in laying aside various articles for other friends. The office pleased Aunty immensely; and as this sad but satisfactory piece of business entailed the necessity of a prolonged visit to town,—where she lived in Frederick's house "like a lady," with two maids to serve her, and a room for a friend, and the most congenial occupation—it is not wonderful that she should have regarded it with pleasure. It pleased Batty too that his son-in-law, whom he described in his own circle as being proud as Lucifer, yet acknowledged in this way the existence and the claims of his wife's family. He sent a friendly message by Aunty to the effect that he himself would soon pay Frederick a visit. He had begun to recover the shock of his daughter's death. Marriage had already separated her from him, and such grief as his does not resist the softening influence of time and circumstances. Frederick's "attention" flattered and pleased him,—and Frederick's family was always something to brag of. Even Innocent's marriage was a feather in Mr. Batty's cap,—"My poor girl's cousin," he called her. He was most amiable to the Eastwoods, who had showed, he said, every respect to his girl. It was only when any appearance of indifference to Amanda's memory displayed itself that his violence of grief returned. When some one suggested that his son-in-law would soon marry again, his face clouded over; "Confound him! if he can forget my girl so soon!" he cried; but Frederick's appeal to Aunty mollified him entirely. "He was bound up in my poor girl, was Frederick Eastwood," he said after that. And during the winter he had been afflicted with rheumatism, and with brandy-and-water, as bad a form of disease; therefore he had not gone to town, nor put his son-in-law's friendliness to the test. But the invitation to Aunty opened the door to further intimacy; so Frederick did not intend—but so Batty thought.

It was a disappointment to both of these personages to find that their host was not really their host, and that in reality it was an empty house in which they were sent to live. The table was indeed supplied at Frederick's cost, and he himself was guiltless of any idea that he was not doing everything that could be required of him; but Amanda's relations were sensitive. Then, too, the maids were not so respectful as Aunty felt they ought to have been. They judged her, I suppose, as we are all disposed to do, by her appearance, and were not careful to do their service according to the

strict measure of their duty. She had expected to go to Frederick's house to become for the time his housekeeper and virtual mistress of his dwelling—to be supreme over the servants, and have the management in her hands—perhaps to drive out in the brougham which Amanda had told her of; and thus to relieve her heavier labours by a few London sights such as had not for a long time been afforded to her. As for Batty, though he intended his visit to be a short one, he, too, expected to be Frederick's guest, to see Frederick's friends, to go with him to his club, and to pick up at least a few names which he could in the future produce among his friends as "cronies of my son-in-law's." He had no intention of being hard upon Frederick. He already knew, and had known before Amanda's reign commenced, that the morality of the young man was far from perfect. If he had discovered new traces of indulgences similar to those he had witnessed in Paris, he would have thought the poor fellow excusable, and would have made every allowance for him. But it was a very different thing to arrive in Frederick's empty house—to be received by Aunty alone, whose society he did not prize highly—to have a dinner served up to him imperfectly cooked, the maids not caring to put themselves out of the way for such guests—to be shown into a bedroom partially dismantled, and in which no particular preparations for his comfort had been thought necessary. "By George! What does it all mean?" he said. "It means that Frederick Eastwood don't think us good enough for his company," said Aunty, who was much galled by the want of reverence for herself shown by the servants. "Well, well," said Batty, persevering in his good-humour, "I dare say he's got other things to think of. I'll set all that right to-morrow." In his heart he concluded that Frederick's reluctance to set up house with Aunty was natural enough, but his own presence would alter all that. He put up with it accordingly the first night. He went to look at his daughter's dresses hung up to air in the best bedroom, and his heart softened more and more. "I don't doubt now as my poor girl was very happy here," he said, looking round upon all the fittings of the room which had been hers. They were of a kind which he considered luxurious—as such they had been chosen by *her*. No want of "respect" was visible in this bower, which she had fitted up for herself. He went to his own room after this inspection, melancholy and slightly maudlin, but satisfied, and had a little more brandy-and-water, and concluded that next day he should see Frederick, and set all right.

Next day, however, things were not set right. He went to the Sealing Wax Office, and found that his son-in-law was out. Frederick was no longer afraid of him, and the senility of fear was over for ever in his mind. Before his marriage he would not have *dared to be* out of the way when a man commanding the secret of *his life called* upon him; but everybody knew now what a

mistake and *mésalliance* poor Eastwood had made, and how he had been providentially delivered from it. Batty, gradually growing furious, proceeded in the afternoon to The Elms, to call upon the ladies. He saw, or thought he saw, them at the window, as he drove to the door in his Hansom, and was about to enter with familiar freedom as a connexion of the family, when Brownlow stopped him solemnly with a "Not at home, sir."

"Not at home!" cried Batty, "I saw them at the window. Take in my name, my good fellow. I am not a stranger. Your mistress will see me."

"My mistress is out," said Brownlow solemnly—which was true to the letter, as Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly had escaped by the garden door at sight of the visitor, and were now deep in the recesses of the Lady's Walk.

Batty looked at him like an infuriated bull—his face growing red, and his eyes projected out of his head. "By Jove, sir, you shall smart for this!" he cried in spite of himself.

Brownlow held his ground with all the imperturbability of a well-trained serving-man.

"Not at home, sir," he repeated, steadily. "Perhaps you would like, sir, to leave a message? My mistress will be in to dinner."

Batty closed the door of his Hansom with a crash that rang through the whole neighbourhood. He drove off furious. But still, after all the business of the day was done, he returned to the little house in Mayfair, feeling it impossible that Frederick could have the audacity to leave him another evening alone. He found Aunty again by herself, almost weeping over the insolence of the maids, with another careless dinner, indifferent service—altogether a contemptuous mode of treatment. "Hang me if I stand this!" he said, making off as soon as he had eaten his badly-cooked meal to his son-in-law's club, resolute to find him, one way or another, and "to have it out with him." Aunty remained behind in equally high dudgeon. She said to herself that "these Eastwoods" must have suborned the servants to be insolent to her. Thus, in the most unconsidered and, so to speak, innocent way did this unfortunate family forge against themselves the thunderbolt which was to strike them almost into social ruin. Frederick had certainly meant to avoid his wife's relations, but not with any such determined and insolent purpose as Batty gave him credit for; and Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly did, indeed, run out of the house in order to avoid receiving the visit of Amanda's father, but only from the impulse of the moment, without any concerted plan. And when it was done, compunctions rose within the breasts of the ladies. Mrs. Eastwood accused herself of her fault at dinner on the same night.

"Should you like me to call on—Miss Johnson, Frederick?" she said. "I am sorry that Nelly and I were so foolish. I am sure I have often received people I had as little sympathy with as Mr.

Batty. Indeed, poor man, I have a great deal of sympathy with him. Should you like me to call on Miss Johnson?"

"Who on earth is Miss Johnson?" cried Frederick. "Aunty, do you mean? Why should you call on her? She has not any social pretensions, that I know of. Poor soul, to do her justice, she never went in for that sort of thing."

"Then you think I need not call?" Mrs. Eastwood said, with a look of relief; "I confess I would rather not. Brownlow," she said, some time after, "you will find a parcel in the library, addressed to Miss Johnson, at Mr. Eastwood's. Will you take it to-night, or to-morrow morning? Leave it with my compliments, and say I hope to have the pleasure of calling before she leaves town. Perhaps it is better to say that," added the diplomatist. "Things might occur to prevent our having the pleasure—but it is as well not to offend any one, unless we cannot help it." She said this without the least idea that anything more than a breach of her own perfect good manners could be involved in offending the Batty family. She had wounded her own sense of right and wrong by avoiding Batty's visit. It did not occur to her to think what effect her "rudeness" might have produced on him.

The parcel in the library contained a few books, some music, a fan, and a handkerchief, left at various times by Amanda at The Elms. Brownlow grumbled slightly, as he went down-stairs, at this commission.

"If a man is to be kept running of errands all day long, 'ow is 'is work to get done?" said Brownlow. Jane, the housemaid, not generally considered very "ready to oblige," answered this appeal at once.

"It's a fine evening," she said, "and I'd like a walk. I'll take 'em for you, Mr. Brownlow, and leave the message. My work's done, and I'm sick of needlework. Don't say a word about it. I'd like the walk."

"There's some one a-waiting, I make no doubt, under the lamp-post," said Brownlow; and Jane had to bear the brunt of some raillery, such as abounds in the regions down-stairs. She took it very calmly, making no protestations.

"There may be half-a-dozen under the lamp-post, for what I know," said Jane.

Thus the matter arranged itself with the utmost simplicity. Never did messenger of evil leave a household more unsuspicious. Mrs. Eastwood had as little conception of what was in preparation as had the innocent Brownlow, who would have walked to the end of the world rather than accept this fatal substitute, had he known. But neither he knew, nor any one. The soft spring air *caressed* Nelly's face as she looked out from the hall window, *wondering if* any one was coming, and saw Jane's dark figure

passing through the gate; just as softly it caressed the countenance of Jane herself, on her way to spread havock and consternation. But the girl at the window had no fear, and the girl at the door only an excited sense of importance. Jane had not even any very bad meaning, so far as she was aware. She was bursting with the something which she had to tell; this could not but bring some advantage to herself, she thought; as for the disadvantage to others, she did not realize to what length that might go, or feel that its greatness would overbalance the importance and benefit to come to her. On this point her imagination altogether failed her. I believe, for my own part, that imagination is the first faculty wanting in those that do harm to their kind, great or small.

Just about the same moment Batty, breathing fire and flame, had found Frederick, and was pouring out the history of his grievances.

"Do you ask a man to your house, you fine gentleman, when you're not at home?" cried Batty. "Lord, I wouldn't invite a dog, unless I meant him to share my kennel. A miserable, empty place, with a couple of impudent maids—that's what you call giving your friends hospitality, eh? You invite a gentleman like that——"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Frederick; "I am not aware that I ever took so great a liberty as to invite you."

"Confound your politeness and your impudence!" said the other: and became so noisy that Frederick left the club, enduring without replying to the abuse of his companion, who, however, gradually calmed down as they emerged into the open air, where there was no one to hear what he said. He told his son-in-law of the affront put upon him at The Elms—how the door had been shut in his face, though he had seen the ladies at the window—and demanded to be invited there, as a proof that no insult was intended. "I don't care twopence for your paltry dinner," he said. "Thank God, I can feed myself and all belonging to me, without being beholden to any man or woman either; but hang me if I'll stand your disdainful ways. If you want to quarrel, say so; now that my poor girl's gone, you and your stuck-up set are nothing to me. But a man's honour's his honour, however you take it. If there weren't no affront intended, as you say, get the old lady to send me an invite, and I'll look over it. I could not speak more fair."

"What you ask me is quite impossible," said Frederick. "Dine with me to-morrow if you will, either at my house, where you are, or somewhere else. I'll arrange it, and I'll give you a good dinner, a better dinner than my mother understands. But I can't interfere with her arrangements. I live at home because it suits me, and there is room; but I never interfere with her guests. My mother has a will of her own. She leaves me my freedom, and I never interfere with her."

From this position Frederick would not recede. Batty, stung by the refusal, furious at himself for having asked, and at his

son-in-law for not having granted, left him at last with a mind on flame, asking himself how he could be revenged on the ungrateful husband who, no doubt, had ill-treated his girl and made her miserable. He soothed and stimulated his feelings by extensive potations upon his drive back in his Hansom to the little house in Mayfair. He would not spend another night under that d——d roof, he would get his traps and go to his hotel, where he was known as a man that could pay his way; the old cat might stay if she liked, but as for him he would have no more of their d——d impertinence. But he'd go to the office next morning and expose the d——d scoundrel, d——n him if he wouldn't. Thus Batty blasphemed as his Hansom drove violently to the door of Frederick's house. He rushed in and mounted the stairs to the deserted-looking drawing-room, in which there were lights. "Get me my things together, old woman," he cried; "quick, I have not a moment to lose. They're all a pack of d——d impudent good-for-nothings. I'll see Frederick Eastwood at Jericho before I stay another night in his d——d miserable house!"

Aunty was standing dissolved in tears, with a coloured photograph in her hand, in a tawdry frame, a portrait of Mrs. Frederick which had been done before she married, and in which her blue gown appeared to perfection, if nothing else. She was not alone; another individual, of whom Batty knew nothing, stood by in a corner, curtseying to him as he came in. Aunty held out the photograph to him, with the tears running down her cheeks.

"Look what I found in an old cupboard among the rubbish!" she cried; "the picture we was all so proud of. Oh, the lovely creature! and them as got her thinking nothing on her. And, oh Batty, there's that to hear as neither you nor me knows nothing about. Look at her, the sweet darling! She's been took from us, she's been murdered! and neither you nor me knows nothing about it! Sit down, man, if you're a man and loved your child. Sit down and listen to what this woman's got to tell you. Sit, Batty, don't be thinking of yourself. Sit down and hear."

He was at once stupefied and excited by the drink he had swallowed, and lost in an intoxication of rage scarcely less confusing. The first words of the tale to which he was thus entreated to listen called up in him a passion of vindictive grief and misery more potent still. He listened with muttered curses mingling with his sobs, looking at the poor faded picture, the simpering image of his daughter who was dead—of his daughter who was murdered —of Amanda, whom he had loved better than anything in the world, and for whom he could take a terrible revenge on the people whom he hated worse than anything in the world. He *sat, and* sobbed, and swore, and listened. No suspicion had ever *crossed his mind* before—now he felt that this was not suspicion, *but certainty.* That girl had done it—that girl who loved Frederick

—and by whom vengeance dire and dreadful could be taken upon Frederick and Frederick's family, upon all who had slighted his child and slighted him. I cannot describe the mixture of real emotion and fictitious excitement, of passionate grief and injured self-love, of fierce desire for justice and wild vindictive personal rage which overwhelmed him. It was terrible, and it was horrible. Jane, frightened at herself, frightened at him, was not allowed to leave the place where he was; he stayed at Frederick's house to mature his vengeance upon Frederick, and he seized upon his witness who was all-important to him, with a force entirely beyond her feeble powers of resistance. Jane, poor creature, not meaning so much harm to others as good to herself, was there and then taken out of her own hands. The harm, too terrible to think of, too fatal to forecast, was no longer problematical. She had set the storm a-going, but only heaven knew where it would end.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE THUNDERBOLT.

LONGUEVILLE HALL, the principal residence of Sir Alexis Longueville, Bart., is one of the first houses of its class in the south of England. It is not of the first magnitude, but it is of the first excellence. It has always been the home of wealth—nothing about it has ever fallen into decay. The façade is pure Italian, and has been ascribed to a very great name indeed in architecture; but in the east wing, which is the oldest part of the house, there are traces (as the "Handbook" to the county will tell you) of much older work. The kitchen is a great vaulted Gothic chamber, whispering recollections of Wolsey, and guests archiepiscopal at the least, and the building has been carefully toned up or down to these relics. You can see at a glance that nothing has ever been neglected or forsaken at Longueville Hall. The Longuevilles had always been a very proud family, though Sir Alexis, by dint of being of the younger branch—not a younger son, but, what is worse, a younger nephew—had learned to veil his native haughtiness in a semblance of theoretical equality; but even he had all the pride of the Longuevilles, though he knew better than to exhibit it where there was no need of such vanities. And to all the Longuevilles their house had always been the first of houses, the one sacred shrine to which no evil was permitted to approach. They had worshipped it with a certain superstition, and the consequence was

that few houses in such perfect preservation were to be found in England. Almost all that remained for Sir Alexis to do when he came into possession was the remodelling of the gardens, and the rearrangement of the picture gallery—not that either was in bad order, indeed, but that, as a connoisseur and amateur flower-gardener of the first water, it was for him one of the first necessities of life to conform these sovereign luxuries to his own fancy. Sir Alexis was luxurious in everything. He was rich, and had few claims upon him beyond those of his own tastes, and accordingly he had spared nothing in the gratification of those tastes. The house accordingly was the pride of the county, the standard of grace and of art for the whole district. "Ah, you should see Longueville," the rural squires said, when they were told of Chatsworth or of Trentham; and when a newly-married gentleman of the district remodelled his old rooms for his bride's arrival, furtive recollections of the reigning house were ever visible in his furniture and flower-beds. Simplicity itself came into fashion through the example of Sir Alexis; and, though the magnificence was less easy to be copied, the attempt was made out with still more eager servility. Every new detail in the great house was described and dwelt upon with unfailing interest throughout the neighbourhood, and when it was known that Sir Alexis was about to introduce that crowning novelty, that final luxury, a young and beautiful wife, the interest rose to a climax. This was a particular in which few of the rural great people could copy, in which most of them had preceded, the baronet. But still in hall, and park, and parsonage throughout the country the new Lady Longueville was looked for with almost enthusiasm. People were honestly glad that the old house was not to die out. Whatever advances democratical feeling may have made, this pleasure in the continuance of a family is, I believe, universal in England. It gave an almost personal gratification to people who had no connexion whatever with the Longuevilles—such a gratification as bystanders have in seeing an apparently failing cause or combatant pick up strength, and gain at the very end an unhoped-for triumph.

There were all kinds of rejoicings on the estate itself, and it was under triumphal arches, with ringing of bells, and sound of music, with a bodyguard of mounted tenantry, and shouts that rent the sky, that Innocent was conducted to her future home. I do not know if she understood the full meaning of such a demonstration, or took in, in the smallest degree (I do not believe it), the elevating sense of local, almost national importance, the *quasi*-sovereignty which such a reception might convey. But her mind was full of a kind of wondering pleasure—the phantasmagoria in this case which glided before her dreamy eyes was pleasant and bright, and amusing and pretty; and she had one strong staff of reality to support her

in her husband, her perfectly kind and always attentive companion, who took complete charge of her, told her what to do, cared for her in everything, and never scolded her; conditions which made up all the Elysium Innocent had ever dreamed of. Sir Alexis had happily hit upon the right key-note at the very beginning. He had taken up, after careful thought, the position which Frederick had stumbled into by chance, and which had bound Innocent to him in absolute allegiance for so long. Sir Alexis, thinking it all carefully over, and determined to be successful in this last great venture of his life, had not been above taking a lesson, even from that attachment to Frederick, which was the only thing he resented, and the only thing he feared in his simple young wife; and the experiment had all the appearance of being triumphantly successful. After the first bewilderment and agitation inseparable from the beginning of a life so strangely new and different from all her past, Innocent had settled down with sweet docility into all the novel habits of her changed existence. The magnificence that surrounded her pleased her. She took to it naturally. The great rooms, the larger lines of drapery, the size and space about her, supplied a want which she had vaguely felt during all her life at The Elms. The want of space was the first thing which had struck her on her arrival, and during all the interval she had been conscious of it. To be sure, the magnificent perfection of Longueville was very unlike the scanty poverty and bareness of the Palazzo Scaramucci; but yet this great house was more like home to her than were the smaller crowded rooms, clothed from top to bottom, of her Aunt's house. She had room to breathe. I think Sir Alexis was disappointed that she did not choose for herself one of the smaller rooms, to make of it her own special bower and the future domestic centre; but he was wise and very tolerant, and did not interfere. "All that will come in time," he said to himself. He did not even ask questions about what she liked or did not like, but skilfully watched and followed the unconscious leading of her inclinations. Few men would have had the patience to do this, as few men would have been able to gratify these inclinations as they showed themselves. But Sir Alexis was capable of both.

I cannot follow out the course of this curious idyll. I suppose it is within the bounds of possibility that a man of fifty might find himself able to play the impassioned part of the young lover in an idyll of the more usual kind, though I avow that to a woman approaching that period of life the possibility appears half humbling, half comical; but Sir Alexis did not attempt this particular *rôle*, which indeed would have been incomprehensible to Innocent. Their mutual position was of a different kind. In marrying a creature so unlike ordinary women—so undeveloped, so simple in mind and thoughts—Sir Alexis had accepted all the responsibilities of the position. He showed his love for her rather in the calm way

in which a father displays his sentiments than with the passion of a young husband. Her beauty delighted him, and the pride of possessing so rare a piece of Nature to crown his collections; and her simplicity—even her pensiveness and silentness had a charm for the man of the world, whom the world had often wearied, but who found a kind of renewal in the society of this soft companion, who accepted all he said with little response but no contradiction, and who turned to him after a while as flowers turn to the sun. And it would be simple foolishness to say that Innocent loved Sir Alexis as women love their husbands; she was incapable of such a sentiment; but she had a gentle affection for him, made up of gratitude and the soft response to kindness which every gentle nature gives. She learned soon and without words the pleasant lesson that her comfort and happiness and well-being were dear to him beyond everything else, that he would neglect no indication of her wishes, no germ of inclination on her part. He took care of her whatever she did, wherever she went, he shaped all his acts and his ways to please her, or—which was just as good—he implied her acquiescence in all he wished, and told her to do what she was glad and pleased to do in obedience to him. He made her drive, he made her ride, he took her out walking, he filled her life with gentle occupation. Sometimes she would write something for him at his dictation, or at his desire—sometimes she would play for him, pleased to think she pleased him, and with growing certainty day by day that everything she did pleased him, *because* she did it, a certainty which is more potent in attracting and confirming affection than perhaps any other secondary influence. And haply Sir Alexis himself not only endured patiently, but enjoyed this curious placid life, which was so strangely different from the ordinary honeymoon. His pride was involved, as well as his affection. Many men dream (I believe) of training their wives into perfect accord, perfect harmony, or rather reflection of their own being; but few men have ever had such an opportunity. Innocent seemed the blank sheet on which he could write his name, the virgin wax which he could mould into any form he pleased. He did not put actual educational processes in operation, but he began to guide her towards the things that pleased him. He praised her music, and so persuaded her to cultivate that faculty, which was perhaps the only one by which she could have reached a certain kind of excellence; he read to her, not inquiring much into her opinions, hoping for little beyond impression, yet placing a certain trust in that. He talked to her, and told her stories of people and places and things, of pictures which she had a natural love for, and books which she respected with a certain awe. His object was not only to ripen and mature the pretty Innocent he was fond of, but to produce out of this germ of being the Lady Longueville, who would be the mother of his children, and mistress of his house —*when* his work was done.

They spent some weeks thus together, pleasant and soft and free from care. Thus all February, with its winds and chills passed over them, and March began. They had not, however, quite completed the honeymoon, when a vague, indescribable shadow fell on this tranquil sweetness. The shadow fell, not on Innocent, who, however, once or twice vaguely fancied on looking at her husband that he might be "angry," but on Sir Alexis alone, who sat long over the newspaper one particular morning, rose pallid as a ghost from reading it,—locked it carefully away in his desk, and telegraphed immediately after to his solicitor in town. His countenance was changed when his young wife came into the room, and that was the first time that Innocent fancied he was angry, but when she asked him, he took her in his arms with more passionate fervour than he had ever shown before.—"Angry! my darling,—can I ever be angry with you?" he cried, frightening her by his vehemence. The solicitor, Mr. Pennefather, a serious man, whom Innocent had scarcely seen before, came next day, and there were very long and solemn discussions between the two men, during which she was left alone, and felt somewhat desolate, poor child; but she was perfectly satisfied when she was told it was business, and asked no questions. When Mr. Pennefather went away, the shadows seemed to pass, and all was well again. The great woods about Longueville began to thrill with the new life of spring, and to open new buds to the genial sun. They seemed an emblem of their master, who was also clothing himself with a new existence, and delights, and hopes. The green slopes of the park surrounded the pair with miles and miles of a lovely solitude, stately in immemorial splendour, yet fresh as a village common. On the terrace, which occupied the front of the house, and upon which opened the many windows of the great drawing-room which Innocent loved, great baskets of flowers were already placed. It had a southern exposure and was sheltered from the winds, and the gardeners were skilful and many. Sir Alexis took pleasure in placing these great bouquets of blossom in his young wife's favourite walk; and if any delicate plant succumbed to the frost, there were abundant means of replacing it. In the distance the broad lawn was marked out with deep golden lines of crocuses, and waving airy anemones, and every common flower that loves the spring; for he was wise enough not to despise the common children of Nature, the sweetest and most abundant riches of the season. After the momentary cloud which had passed over their sky, he was more tender than ever, more constantly watchful over her; and much of their time was spent on this terrace, where they would sometimes sit together, sometimes wander, from one end to another, talking as they called it, which meant that Sir Alexis would talk and Innocent listen, looking up at him with docile, grateful eyes—or reading, when she was more attentive still,

absorbed with the story; for it was always story, either poetry or prose. This was how they were occupied on one mild afternoon early in March. The sun slanted from the west upon the green terrace, one end of which lay in full light, while the other was turned into a chill corner of shadow by the projection of the west wing. The husband and wife were walking slowly along the sunny side, now and then making a long pause by one of the flower baskets, gay with hyacinths and hardy azaleas. Sir Alexis, with the sunshine streaming upon the crisp curls of his hair, which was getting grey, read to her one of Tennyson's lighter and more youthful poems. I think it was "The Miller's Daughter." Sometimes, if he thought her attention was wandering, he would put out his hand and lay it lightly on her shoulder, holding the book from which he read in his other hand; and on these occasions Innocent turned to him with a smile, in which a faint dawning sense of amusement at his solicitude mingled with the natural dreamy sweetness. She was dressed in a gown made of white cashmere, somewhat more akin to the fashion than was her wont, yet falling in the soft, clinging folds peculiar to the material, with a grace which modern fashion scarcely permits—and a little cloak of pale blue velvet, gray-blue, with a bloom upon it such as painters love, made after the fashion of the old cloak which had been her constant wrap in Pisa. It was Sir Alexis who had disinterred the ancient garment, and had learned the associations it had to her. He was a man who thought of such trifles, and he had himself chosen with great trouble the colour of the material in which it was reproduced. Her hair had been allowed to fall down, as of old, on her shoulders. Nobody could be more strenuous on the point of appearance than was Sir Alexis on state occasions, but he liked to see his young wife look as childlike as when he saw her first. Thus she strayed along by his side, a child, yet with the mysterious maturity of wifehood in her eyes—a gentle vagrant in a world not half realized, yet one whose simple feet had trod through mysteries and wonders of life and death—the simplest of girls, yet a great lady-sovereign in a breadth of country as great as many a principality, and with power for good or evil over many a soul unborn. The evening sun slanted down upon her uncovered head, the princely house held all its windows open behind her, the afternoon bees, ready to fly home, sucked their last at the hyacinths with drowsy hum, and the soft grass felt warm under her feet. There was not a cloud upon the sky, save those which had already began to perform the final ceremonial of the sunset in the west. How peaceful the scene! Tranquil happiness in the air, soft sunshine, nothing impassioned, lofty, ecstatic, but a gentle perfection of well-being. Every line of those trees, every blade of the growing grass, seemed to bear its part in the peaceful fulness of enjoyment, which was almost too still and soft to be called by that name.

"The Miller's Daughter!" Our poet was not the great poet we know when he wrote that soft and youthful pastoral. There was nothing in it too deep for Innocent. She listened, with her heart gently stirred, with a sense of all the peace surrounding her, and the grave, calm love that cherished her, and her own ineffable safety from all evil—smiling when her husband laid his hand upon her shoulder. There have been scenes of more exalted, more profound emotion; but none more soft, more safe, more peaceful, safe, and sure than this afternoon scene at Longueville. The very afternoon was tranquil in its slumberous peacefulness, like the girl's heart.

They were disturbed by the sounds of wheels ringing sharply upon the gravel of the avenue, and dispersing the pebbles on all sides, as if some one in hot haste was on his way to the Hall. The avenue was invisible from the terrace; but this harsh sound offended Sir Alexis. It was no carriage, but some impertinent two-wheeled thing like a dog-cart which made this ado—he could tell as much by the sound. His brow puckered with impatience; he stopped his reading. Something of the look which had made Innocent think he was "angry," a sharp anxiety, a sudden pallor, came over his face.

"It is some Cockney party to see Longueville, no doubt," he said, in a voice which sounded harsh to Innocent. "But, thank heaven! they will be disappointed to-day."

The sound ceased, but he could not resume his reading all at once.

"That is the nuisance of having a handsome house," he said; "all the fools in the country think they have a right to come and see it. I have no doubt these impertinent intruders will go away quite angry that we choose to keep our house to ourselves. I do not know what the world is coming to. But whom have we here?"

Two men were approaching, following the butler, who was a very solemn personage, looking like a bishop at the least, but who this time was pale and scared, with a curious look of warning and alarm. The men who followed at first only conveyed to the beholder the impression that they were "not gentlemen." As, however, they advanced closer an indefinable air about them began to take effect upon Sir Alexis, as it seemed to have done upon his servant. The paleness of his face increased till it grew ashen-grey.

"Had you not better go in, Innocent?" he said hoarsely, laying his hand once more on her shoulder; but his voice was strange, not like the gentle tone in which he usually gave her his instructions, and Innocent kept her place by him, falling a step behind him, but showing no other appearance of embarrassment or shyness. She was not looking at them, but saw vaguely that the new-comers were not interesting to her. She waited because her husband waited, to see what they wanted. It was an interruption—but interruptions did not affect Innocent as they do most people. "The Miller's

Daughter" and the lingering warmth of the spring afternoon would wait.

"Two—gentlemen, Sir Alexis—to speak with you," said the butler, standing aside with an air of fright. He did not go away when he announced them in this simple way, but stood still, like a man paralyzed, not seeming to know what he did.

Shabby men—not such men as had any right to penetrate there—into that region of refinement and splendour. They kept very close to each other. One of them, the shabbiest of the two, kept so close on his companion's track that their shadows fell into one along the grass. The other cleared his throat, shifted from one foot to another, took out his handkerchief, and wiped his face. He was embarrassed and uncertain.

"Is there anything in which I can serve you, gentlemen?" said Sir Alexis, with a voice so strangely altered by restrained excitement that even Innocent looked up at him wondering, not recognizing the sound.

"I don't want to do nothing disagreeable," said the foremost, "or to make any unpleasantness as can be spared. It is an 'orrible business, make the best of it as you can. We won't give no trouble as we can help, Sir Alexis. She may go in her own carriage, and you may go along with her, if you please. But I can't disguise from you as my lady must come with us. I don't know how much you knows about it—and I don't doubt as one way or other she'll get off——"

"What is the meaning of this?" said Longueville. O God! how well he knew what it meant! He made a step forward in front of his wife by instinct, then stopped short in the confusion of impotence, knowing that he could do nothing, and that his only policy was to submit.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the man, moulding his hat in his hands with real embarrassment. "I feels for you with all my heart. I have my warrant all in order. You shan't be deceived nohow—and anything as we can do to make the blow less 'eavy and spare ill-convenience you may calculate upon. But I have to do my duty——"

"Of course, you must do your duty," said Sir Alexis, pale, but nerving himself for the worst. "But, my good fellow, here is evidently some mistake. What"—he paused with an effort, for his lips were parched—"what—do you mean?—whom—do you seek here?"

"If I must say it in so many words," said the officer, "I have come for my Lady Longueville. Here's my warrant. It's all in the paper.—'Dame Innocent, wife of Sir Alexis Longueville, Bart.——'"

"For what? Good heavens!"

How vain it was to ask!—as if since even he saw these men the certainty of it, the shame, the misery, the horrible possibilities

which might follow, had not risen like a picture, pale against a lurid background of suffering, before his eyes.

"For the murder of Amanda Eastwood, at Sterborne, on the 21st of October last——"

For the first time Innocent was fully roused. She uttered a low cry—she turned to her husband with a wild look of wonder and appeal.

"You said it would all be made right—all right!" she said, clasping her helpless hands, appealing against her sudden misery to heaven and earth.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE FIRST DESERTER.

THE next morning after this event, Ernest Molyneux, with a newspaper in his hand, jumped out of a hansom at the door of The Elms and rushed into the house. The door was open; a certain air of agitation and excitement was about the place, some trunks stood in the hall, corded and labelled as for a journey. He told Brownlow, who came out of the dining-room at the sound of his arrival, to send Miss Eastwood to him directly, and made his way into the drawing-room, which was empty. Empty, arranged with all its usual peaceful order and grace, full of sunshine, sweet with the flowers which looked in brightly through the round window-door of the conservatory, with novels from Mudie's on the table, Mrs. Eastwood's work-basket, and Nelly's knitting. Nothing can excuse untidiness in an English house—the housemaid must do her duty whether we live or die, or even if things happen to us which are worse than life or death. Molyneux was confounded by the tranquil comfort, the brightness and calm of this shrine of domestic life. It checked him in his eagerness and heat. The horrible news in the paper seemed to lose all appearance, all possibility of truth. He calmed down. He asked himself what he would have to say to Nelly after demanding her presence in such hot haste if this rumour was not true. A little shame, a little compunction came into his mind. He had not come here to console, but to reproach. He had to wait for some time before she came, and in the meantime the absolute stillness of the house, the tranquillizing warmth and brightness of the sunshine, worked upon him with the most curious effect. He became more and more ashamed of himself, and I do not know what moral result might have been produced in the end had Nelly

delayed her coming much longer, or had her own demeanour carried out the effect of this scene. But Nelly came in with red eyes and pale cheeks, in the simplest of travelling dresses, with this look of mingled excitement and exhaustion which more than anything else betrays "something wrong" in the history of a family. She came in eagerly, almost running to him, with that instinctive and unconscious appeal which is conveyed by visible expectation, and which it is so difficult to disappoint, her hands outstretched, her eyes ready to fill with tears. The sight of her emotion, however, had an effect upon Molyneux which totally counteracted the calm of the house. It restored him to his position of criticism and superiority. He took her hands, it is true, and even kissed her cheek, though with something of that indifference which comes with habit. But he made no demonstration of sympathy. He said hastily, "Nelly, I am come to you for information. Have you seen what is in the papers? Surely, surely, it cannot be true!"

The check and sudden revulsion which comes to all who expect too much came to Nelly. She withdrew her hands from him. Her tears, which were ready to fall, went back somehow. She retreated a little from his side; but her pride supported her. At that moment and for ever Nelly closed the doors of her heart against her lover. It is true indeed, as the reader will perceive, that she threw them open again once, and once only, not knowing that her decision had been made, and believing there was still a place of repentance; but certainly, though she was not aware of it, those doors closed now with a crash of sound which rang in her ears and made her deaf to everything else. She thought for the moment, however, that the ringing in her ears meant only weariness and pain, and sat down, to keep herself from fainting, in her mother's chair.

"If you mean is it true that Innocent, poor Innocent, has done what they say," said Nelly, low and trembling, "but all the rest is true enough. They have put her in——Oh me! Oh me! how can I say it? It is those dreadful people, whom Frederick bound himself to for a curse to us all."

"But," said Molyneux—he was more bewildered than I can say to find himself uncontradicted, to know that anything so incredible was really true—"but those dreadful people, as you call them, could not do this without some cause, something to build upon. For God's sake, tell me! How do they dare? Is there any foundation?"

"Mamma went down to inquire the very day," said Nelly dreamily, repeating the old story; "she lost no time. She came back saying it was sheer delusion, nothing more. There was no foundation. Every one was quite satisfied that Mrs. Frederick died of heart-disease. Nobody, except Innocent herself, ever dreamt of anything of the kind."

"But Innocent herself—what was it that she dreamt of? What was the delusion?"

"She had to give a sleeping draught, and she gave—too much," said Nelly simply. "She was frightened to death. She left the house instantly, and came home. Oh, how well I recollect that dreadful morning. She came in accusing herself, and Jane heard what she said. Ernest, could such evidence harm her? Is it possible? Her own wild idea, nothing more."

"I am bewildered by all this," said Molyneux. "You have known it ever since Mrs. Frederick's death, and I have been allowed to—— You have never breathed a syllable to me."

"Oh, how could I?" cried Nelly. "Think, to put it into words was like giving some sanction to it; and you were not fond of her as we were. It was on my lips a hundred times. But, Ernest, you were not fond of her."

"No, thank Heaven!" he said, walking up and down the room. The chief feeling in his mind was anger, mingled with a certain satisfaction in the sense that he had a right to be angry. "I hope, at least, Longueville knew," he added, after a pause. "I hope you think he, being fond of Innocent, had the right——"

"Ernest," said Nelly piteously, moved by one of those last relentings of love which cannot, for very pity, consent to its own extinction, "surely you have some feeling for us in our great trouble. It was because poor Innocent told him, appealed to him, that they ever married at all. He was very, very kind, very good—to us all."

"Apparently, then, everybody has been considered worthy of your confidence but myself," said Molyneux; but, notwithstanding, the knowledge that Sir Alexis knew made him think better of the business. Longueville, he thought, was not such a fool as to have married a girl against whom there was real evidence of such a tremendous character. "It is a very good thing that you have Longueville to depend upon," he said, after a pause. "Of course, it is chiefly his business; of course, he has been making his arrangements to meet the danger; he will get the best counsel—the best——"

"Ernest," said Nelly, rising from her seat. She put her hands together unconsciously as she went up to him—"Ernest! We have often talked of what might me, if something really worth your while should offer; not mere troublesome law-business, but something that would really exercise your mind—something worthy of you. And, Ernest, would it not be all the more great, the more noble, if it was to save an innocent creature from destruction? You know her almost as well as we do," cried the girl, the big tears running down her pale cheeks. "You have seen her grow from almost a child. You know how simple she is, how innocent, like her name. Perhaps she was slow at first to see that we loved her. Perhaps we

did not go the right way. But you have seen it all, Ernest; you have known her from the first—from a child. She never was anything but a child. And you are eloquent—you could bring any one through whose cause you took up. Oh, what a power it is—and when you can use it to save the innocent, Ernest! I do not say for my sake——"

She stood before him more eloquent in her tears than he, with all his cleverness, could ever have been, with one soft appealing hand on his arm, and the other raised in passionate entreaty. Her eyes were fixed upon him with a prayer as passionate—all Nelly's heart, all her soul, was in this appeal. It was for Innocent—to save her; it was for Ernest—to save him; it was for herself, poor Nelly, to change her despairing into life and hope. Never was face more full of emotion than the glowing, moving, tearful face, every line quivering, every feature inspired, which she turned upon him. Her very look was a prayer intense and passionate. But opposite to this entreating face was one which lowered like the skies when everything is black with storm. Ernest shut himself as heaven itself seems to close sometimes upon the prayers of the despairing. He stood obdurate, unmoving, unmoved, looking at her with blank brows, answering with a hard abstinence from all emotion the imploring look, the impassioned words. Nelly saw how it was before she had ceased speaking; but she repulsed the chill of certainty from her heart, and prayed on with eyes and gestures, even when she felt herself to be praying against hope.

At last he threw off, not roughly, but crossly, her hand from his arm, and, as he himself would have said, "put a stop to it."

"Nelly," he said, "are you mad? What do you mean? Longueville, you may be sure, has secured counsel already; I suppose he has not been taken by surprise as I have been? And supposing I could do it, would you have me begin my career under such unfavourable circumstances, on the spur of the moment, for the sake of mere family connexion? I have often heard that women carried their feeling for their own family a very long way; but to prefer this girl and her folly to the interests of your future husband—to ask *me* to commit myself——Are you mad, Nelly? Why, my interests are yours—my character is yours. You should beg me rather to keep out of it—you should keep out of it yourself, for my sake. What is Innocent to us?—a silly creature, half idiot, an ungrateful little minx, fond of nobody but Frederick, and, I daresay, capable of striking a bold stroke for him, as she seems to say she has done. Don't look at me as if you would eat me. I don't say she has done it. I know nothing but what you have told me."

Nelly shrank away from him to her mother's chair. A burning blush covered her face; her tears dried up as if by scorching heat. Her eyes flashed and shone; her whole aspect, her very figure seemed to change.

"I may ask at least one thing of you," she said; "and that is to forget what I told you. I was very foolish to say so much. Women are prone to that, I suppose, as you say; but I may trust to your honour to forget it? not to repeat it to any one? I shall be very thankful if you will promise that."

"Why, Nelly!" he cried, "*I* repeat what you have said to me! You don't take me for a scoundrel, I hope, because I don't act upon everything you say——"

She smiled faintly, and bowed her head, accepting the assurance; and then between these two, who had loved each other, who were betrothed and bound to each other, there ensued a pause. She said nothing, she did not even look at him; and he looking at her, feeling somehow that greater things had happened even than those which appeared, cast about in his mind how to speak, and did not know what to say.

"Nelly," he said, at last, clearing his throat, "I see you are angry with me; and, though I think you are rather unreasonable, I am very sorry to vex you. I would do as much as most men for the girl I love; but I should be compromising your prospects, as well as my own, were I to plunge into this business without reflection, as you tell me. I am sure, when you are cool and able to think, you will see the justice of what I say."

Still Nelly made no answer. She could not trust herself to speak; her heart beat too loudly, her breath came too fast. But to him it seemed obduracy, determined and conscious resistance, like his own.

"If this is how you take it, of course I can't help myself," he said; "but you are very unjust—and unreasonable. A woman may stretch her demands too far. There is much that I would be glad to do for your sake; but, even for your sake, it is best that I should employ my own judgment; and I cannot do what that judgment condemns——"

"No," said Nelly, "No—I did not say for my sake; but if I did it would not have mattered. No, you must use your own judgment. But will you excuse me now," she added, after a momentary pause, "if I say good-bye? We are going—to Sterrington directly, and I have still some things to do."

"To Sterrington! To mix yourself up with Innocent, and trumpet your connexion with her to all the world!"

"To stand by one of mamma's children in her trouble," said Nelly, looking at him with tears shining in her eyes, and with a smile which increased his exasperation a hundredfold. "I am sorry you do not understand. Mamma's place is with Innocent, and mine with mamma."

"This is folly, Nelly," he cried, "absolute folly. She has her husband to look after her. Have I no claims? and for my sake you ought not to go."

She rose, holding out her hand to him, still with that pale smile upon her face. "Let us part friends," she said. "This is not a time to discuss any one's claims. What you cannot do for my sake I will not do for yours. Good-bye."

"Is this final?" he cried, in rage and dismay.

"It would be best so," said Nelly gently.

But she did not know how he went away. She kept her composure, and appeared, so far as he could make out, as resolute as she was calm; but there was a dimness in Nelly's eyes and a ringing in her ears. The room seemed to swim about her, and his face, which flamed into sudden rage, then went out, as it were, like an extinguished light. Gradually the darkness that closed over everything lightened again, and she found he had gone. She had not fainted nor lost consciousness, but a mist had overspread her soul and her thoughts, and all that was done and said. She sat still where he left her, quite silent, coming to herself. She forgot that she had things to do, and that it would soon be time for the train. She sat still, realizing what had happened, looking, as it were, at what she had done. She was not sorry but stunned, wondering how she came to do it—not grieved that she had done it. I don't know how long she sat thus; it seemed to her hours, but that of course was a mere impression. What roused her at last was the entrance of another man, as much excited, as anxious, and curious as Ernest had been. He came to offer his services, to ask if he should go at once and put himself at the disposal of Sir Alexis; and in the second place—only in the second place—to ask what it meant. Nelly sat and listened to his eager questions, and then burst into sudden tears. She gave him no reason for them—why should she? There were reasons enough and to spare, without diving into her personal history, for any outburst of sorrow. John Vane put no questions, but he had met Ernest rushing in the opposite direction, and I think he divined that some reflection of a personal misery was in Nelly's paleness and agitation. But he asked her no questions, and he tried not to ask himself any, which was harder still.

When Mrs. Eastwood came into the room, which she did very soon after in her bonnet and cloak ready for the journey, Vane went up to her, holding out his hand.

"Forgive me," he said humbly, "for having done you a temporary wrong in my thoughts."

"How so, Mr. Vane?" said Mrs. Eastwood, with a faint smile, the first that had relieved the tension of her pale face since the terrible news came.

"I can understand now all about Innocent's marriage," he said. "God forgive me for doubting her best friends. I thought you were like other women—thinking of a good match above everything."

"Are you so sure that other women think of a good match above

everything?" said Mrs. Eastwood, once more with a smile, and then as she had spared a moment from Innocent, compunction seized her. "What are we to do," she cried, "oh, what are we to do for my poor child?"

"I am going with you," said Vane, to whose own eyes (though he was a man not given to emotion) the moisture rose. Mrs. Eastwood sent Nelly away to put on her bonnet, knowing nothing of the interview which Nelly had gone through in the meantime—and entered into all the dismal story which Nelly had briefly unfolded to him. He made no reproaches as Ernest had done—that he had not been told at the time. He understood without explanations how unwilling they must have been to confide such a story to any one, even to Innocent's relation; and he listened with the deepest attention to Mrs. Eastwood's account of her own cursory visit to Sterborne, and the total absence of all suspicion at the time of Amanda's death. John Vane, an idle man, had read for the bar in a wrong way in his youth, not pursuing the study, but yet retaining some fragments of knowledge—and it seemed to him that this was very important. He discussed the whole matter closely, giving, his companion thought, his whole attention to it; but yet—will the reader think less well of John Vane for it?—within a corner of his mind or heart, if you like the word better, he was following Nelly, wondering why she took so long to put on her bonnet—whether she was crying, poor soul, over some lost illusion, some disappointed hope of her own, as well as over her cousin? He was almost glad to think that he alone was, as it were, in her confidence—that even her mother did not know that Molyneux had been there and had disappointed Nelly. He must have disappointed her (this train of thought went on like an undercurrent while he discussed, and that with an anxiety beyond words, the fate of Innocent)—he must have disappointed her, for he had left her. No true lover—no man worthy to be Nelly's husband—would have left her at such a moment. Had she been wise enough to see this? Would she be strong enough to perceive it hereafter? Mrs. Eastwood did not know—she made not the slightest allusion to Ernest. When Nelly had come down-stairs, and the cab had driven up to the door which was to take them to the railway, she left detailed instructions with Brownlow as to the messages to be given to callers. "You can tell Mrs. Everard and Mr. Brotherton, if they call, that they will hear from me very soon," she said; "and the same to Mr. Molyneux; though, indeed, Nelly, it is negligent not to have let Ernest know sooner."

"I have let him know," said Nelly softly; and Vane thought she gave him a piteous appealing look, as if to beg him not to say anything—a look which almost made him glad, though she was in trouble, and they were all in trouble. There are things that make one's heart rise even in the midst of lamentation and woe.

"That is well—that is always something spared," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a sigh; "and be careful of the young gentlemen, Brownlow. Ask Mr. Eastwood if he would like any change made in the dinner-hour while I am away, and see that Mr. Richard is called regularly at seven, and that he has his coffee. My poor Dick must go on working, whatever happens," she said, taking her place in the cab with a sigh.

And thus Innocent's friends, all who loved her, gathered round in her direst need. There was but one deserter, and he no friend of hers.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE EVIDENCE.

"BUT it is true—I killed Frederick's wife," said Innocent.

Her voice was tranquil as usual; but her eyes were dilated and full of woe, like the eyes of a dumb creature hardly used. The scene had strangely changed for her. Instead of the sunny terrace at Longueville, the sunny garden at The Elms, the four gray walls of a prison-cell surrounded her. I will confess to the gentle reader that I never was in a prison, and I do not know how it looked; but I never heard that there were special hardships in poor Innocent's case, and I believe, indeed, that she was allowed many relaxations of the ordinary prison rules. She was seated on her little bed, Mrs. Eastwood was with her, her husband, and Mr. Pennefather, the solicitor, who had visited Sir Alexis at Longueville, had come down to Sterrington with the eminent lawyer who was to defend poor Innocent, to have a personal interview with her. These two learned persons were subjecting the poor girl to a private examination, and straining all their faculties to get at the exact facts of the case.

"Oh, Innocent," said Mrs. Eastwood, "how often have I told you, dear, that you are mistaken. Do not give this gentleman a false idea. It is a delusion, a mere delusion——"

"Let her tell me her own story," said Mr. Serjeant Ryder, the lawyer. He was impatient of interference, and it seemed to him that a woman in tears, ready to interrupt his unfortunate client's story by weak denials of a guilt which the culprit confessed, was a most undesirable assistant at this interview. "Let her tell me her own story," he repeated, "there is nothing so important as that I should know the whole truth."

He had heard the story already, and had been led to believe the case simple enough. But an experimental lawyer, accustomed to all the subtilities of crime, does not easily believe in the most obvious story. "Mere delusion" might, indeed, tempt a fool to accuse himself, but it was not enough to explain a criminal prosecution, and all the solemnities involved. I cannot describe the feelings with which the two bystanders kept silence, and listened to Innocent's story, which she repeated as she had so often repeated it. Sir Alexis did not say a word, and he put his hand on Mrs. Eastwood's arm, restraining her when she would have spoken. Innocent was left free to tell her own tale, which she did in her simplicity, giving all the details with absolute exactness and that curious matter-of-fact truth which was as characteristic of her as her visionary looks. She forgot nothing, she left out no circumstances. It was not until the second time of going over it that she even interposed that gentle profession of innocence, "I did not mean it," in the midst of her full confession of guilt.

"You did not mean it?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Eastwood, unable to keep silence, "how can you ask her such a question? She mean it! She did not even do it, though she thinks so—but mean it? Oh, Sir Alexis, this is too much."

"I must take my own way," said the lawyer. "I beg your pardon, but I cannot be interrupted. You did not mean what? To hurt the sick woman, or to put more than twenty drops in the glass? These, you perceive, are two different things. Pray let me put my questions my own way. If I could be permitted to see Lady Longueville alone, it would be much better. Your feelings, I am sure, are perfectly natural, but if I could see her alone——'

Innocent put out her hand and caught at her aunt's dress with a low cry. "Oh, do not go away!" she cried, roused out of her usual calm. "It would be better to kill me than to leave me here alone. Oh, if you knew what it is to be alone!—all strange faces—nothing you ever saw before—and not even the window as there used to be in Pisa, and Niccolo to come in before he went away. Oh, Niccolo, Niccolo!" cried the girl, her voice rising in a cry of such loneliness as went to the heart even of the men who questioned her. She calmed down next moment, and looked with a faint smile from one to another—from her aunt to her husband. "When it is day and you are here it is different; but at night it is all a mist and dark, and there seems no one but Niccolo in all the world, and Niccolo is not here."

"Oh, Innocent, my darling," said Mrs. Eastwood, "if they would but let me stay with you night and day——"

"Niccolo never stayed the night," said Innocent, wandering off,

with a vague smile, into her recollections. "When he had put down the salad and said, 'Felicissima notte,' he went away. I could hear his steps all the way down the stairs; but I never was frightened. If he would but come in and say, 'Good-night,' I should be happier—for sometimes I think I am in Pisa now, only the room is smaller and there is no window," she said, looking up wistfully at the high window in the wall, which, with all her exertions, she could not reach. While she was thus gazing with her head turned away, the two lawyers exchanged significant glances. Mr. Serjeant Ryder looked at Sir Alexis with a faint elevation of his eyebrows, and shut his note-book with something between impatience and despair.

"I don't think," he said, "that I need trouble Lady Longueville any further to-day."

"Go and ask him what he thinks," said Mrs. Eastwood anxiously in the ear of Sir Alexis; but Longueville, too, shook his head. He saw well enough what Innocent's counsel thought; he had no desire to have his conclusion put into words. He himself could not banish from his mind a chill sense that Innocent had retrograded, that she had gone back ever so far from the mental condition to which she had reached when he read to her on the terrace at Longueville. A chill dread struck his heart that this terrible event in her life would contradict all his hopes, would put a final end to all her possibilities of development, and reduce the simple unopened mind into mere idiocy. This horror of doubt being in his own mind, it may be supposed that he had no wish to have it confirmed and forced upon him by the voice of another. He shook his head and threw himself down in the languor of despondency upon the wooden stool from which his counsel had risen. This was almost the most bitter moment he had yet gone through. She for whom he had hoped so much, his crowning glory, his rare, unique blossom of humanity, would this be her conclusion? She would be acquitted —on the score of idiocy! It seemed the most hopeful, the only prospect before them.

Mrs. Eastwood happily did not give herself up to any such thoughts. Her office for the moment was to cheer Innocent, not to forecast what was coming. She sat down beside her on the bed, and told her everything she could think of which would amuse her. She told her minutely how Nelly and herself had found lodgings opposite the prison. "You cannot see us, my darling; but we can see you," she said, with a show of cheerfulness, "at least we can see your window. One of us is always watching you, Innocent. Is not that a little comfort to think of? If we cannot say good-night, so that you can hear, we say it in our hearts. Nelly sat half the night through watching, looking up at the window. What a pity it is so high—if it were not so high you could look across the road to us, and then you would feel as if you were at home. But when you say

your prayers, dear, then you can make sure that we are with you; for I don't think there is one hour—not an hour, my darling—that Nelly and I are not praying for you." Here for a moment Mrs. Eastwood broke down.

"Yes," said Innocent, pleased, like a child. "I will do so too. Saying your prayers is a very good way; but I wish I could go down-stairs and across to the Spina as I used to do. I liked the chapel at the High Lodge; the minster is too great. It is so strange," she went on, with a smile. "I cannot get it out of my heart that the Arno is down there, and the Spina Church just as it used to be. It is because I cannot look out of the window."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Eastwood caressingly; "but of course you know that the Spina is not there."

"Oh, yes," said Innocent; "and sometimes I think it must be Longueville and the great trees stretching for miles—it is so strange not to see; but I never think it is *home*. I do not feel that it could be home."

"Listen," said Mrs. Eastwood in Longueville's ear. "She is as sensible as any one can be—full of imagination, poor darling; but nothing else. God bless her! she was fond of Niccolo, and all that. And it has a very strange effect upon one, when one cannot see out of the window. She is as sensible as you or me."

Longueville shook his head still, but took comfort. I think, however, that when he went away it was, on the whole, better for the poor prisoner; for though the anxiety of the watch he kept upon her was disguised as far as he could do it, it still disturbed vaguely the absolute confidence which alone made Innocent happy. The doubt disturbed her—she could not have told why. It was only when she knew that she was entirely in possession of the sympathy of her surroundings, a knowledge which she attained by no intellectual process, but by something in the air, that Innocent lost her look of woe. Even the prison, the terrible loneliness of the night which she had to look forward to; the shock of this dreadful event which had taken place in her life did not prevent her smile from regaining much of its simple sweetness when her aunt talked to her alone, prattled to her—Heaven help them!—of subjects much unlike those which one would expect to be discussed in a prison cell, of every gentle folly that occurred to her, and trifles far enough from her aching heart.

Mr. Ryder and Mr. Pennefather remained in Sterrington that night, and there was a long and solemn consultation held after the prison was closed to Innocent's relations in the little sitting-room opposite the jail where the Eastwoods were living. The Spring Assizes were approaching very closely, and Innocent's anxious defenders were divided upon one important subject—

whether to seek for delay and gain time to collect all the evidence they could in her favour, including that of the doctor's, who had left Sterborne after Amanda's death, and who was naturally a most important witness, or whether to allow the case to come on at the Assizes which was to be held in less than three weeks, and for which the quiet country town of Sterrington was already preparing with unusual flutter of anticipation, for an exciting and interesting trial, a very romance in real life, which would draw the eyes of the world upon it, was no common occurrence. Both the lawyers were anxious for delay, but the family more immediately concerned were equally anxious that the trial might be got over as speedily as possible; partly, perhaps, because it was impossible for them to believe in any but a favourable issue as soon as the case was fully gone into, and partly from the more serious and substantial reason that all felt the impossibility of Innocent bearing up against a lengthened interval of loneliness and suspense. "The child will die," Mrs. Eastwood said. Sir Alexis did not explain his fears, but they were of a still more miserable kind. Whether she lived or died, she would probably, he believed, have fallen into a blank idiocy even before these three terrible weeks were over, and if the three weeks were lengthened into three months, there could be no hope for her whatever. "The trial must come on as soon as possible," he said, with an obstinacy which his confidential adviser, Mr. Pennefather, who flattered himself that he knew Sir Alexis to the very depths of his soul, could not understand, and no argument could move him from his position. Altogether, the lawyers, I fear, were not satisfied with the unhappy "relations." It is true that relations are apt to be either over-confident or over-frightened, and to insist illogically upon the innocence of the accused, when the thing to be done is to prove that innocence—a very different matter from believing in it. But their obstinacy on the point of the trial, their indifference to the necessity of the doctor's presence, and the irrelevant interruptions made by the ladies, at last provoked Mr. Ryder, who was not famed for his temper. "These matters ought to be left entirely in our hands," he said peremptorily. "The doctor, so far as I can see at present, is the only witness on whom we could depend."

"But when I tell you," cried Mrs. Eastwood, "that I was there—that no one thought of such a thing—that it was a mere delusion——"

"What was a mere delusion?" said the lawyer sharply. "Did Lady Longueville give the draught or not? Is she under a delusion as to the actual opiate, or simply as to having killed the patient? If it is certain that she gave the draught, then the medical evidence is all important. We must discriminate between these two points. Is there any proof, except her confession that she gave the draught at all?"

Mrs. Eastwood looked up quickly, with a hard, sudden drawing of her breath. She looked round the men, who were none of them in her confidence, and a sudden sense of fright sealed her lips. "They have no proof that I know of," she answered, faltering, and, taking courage, bore the steady look which Mr. Ryder gave her without shrinking. As for Alexis, his mind was absorbed in his own gloomy thoughts, and he paid no attention to this little episode. Vane, for his part, had not heard of the trial. Mrs. Eastwood withdrew soon after, trembling from head to foot, and went to the little room, in which Nelly was sitting, gazing up at poor Innocent's high window with tender superstition, and threw herself upon her child's shoulder, sobbing and sick with misery. Frederick had taken the phial out of her desk, and had thrown it into the fire at the first rumour of doubt about Amanda's death. She had suffered him to do it, she could not tell why, and now how was she to explain? What was she to do? To say that he had done it would be to involve him, already, unhappily, too much involved, for whose sake it would be the effort of the prosecution to prove the deed had been done. And it was easier to be silent about it altogether than to tell how so fatal a mistake had been made. The more Mrs. Eastwood thought of it, the more she felt how serious a mistake it was; and if she could have said truly that she herself had done it, I think she would have gone back at once and told her story. But to say that Frederick had interfered, that he had destroyed the only tangible proof of poor Innocent's wild tale —he whom everybody thought badly of already, who was supposed the cause of all; who to every vulgar imagination, even to his own, supplied the motive necessary to make Innocent's guilt possible,—how could she mention his name? how involve him doubly, making him, as it were, an accomplice? With dismal confidence in chance, she said to herself that no one knew anything about the phial; that it would not be thought of unless she herself mentioned it. But after this she shrank from discussion of the subject. She avoided any encounter with the lawyers. She was to be, poor soul, one of the principal witnesses, and many a miserable, anxious prayer did the poor woman make that God would direct the minds of her questioners away from this one point upon which she had gone astray. It seemed easier to her to trust to a miracle for deliverance than to confess the truth.

During the interval which followed it would be impossible to describe the alternations of hope and of misery which swept over the unhappy family, who kept together in their little lodging opposite the prison. They were allowed to be with poor Innocent during the greater portion of the day, and then the ladies put on a semblance of ease, and even gaiety, which was far from real. But in the dreary evenings they were apart from her—and the evenings of March are still long—the vicissitudes of feeling to

which they were subject were like the changes of a fever. Sometimes it seemed so impossible to them that any one could for a moment believe so incredible an accusation; and again all the horrible accumulation of proof would gather round their souls. The love of the poor girl for her cousin—love which they had themselves believed, and of which they but dimly now had come to recognize the real character; her dislike, openly professed, for Amanda; her strange vigil by Amanda's side, brought about in so simply accidental a way, yet which might be made to bear the aspect of a deliberate plot; her sudden and unaccountable flight; her confession. When they recollected all these things, horror would come over them, dismay, and almost despair.

These and a great many other particulars were in all the papers, reported and dwelt upon with all the avidity natural when the public mind has a story so interesting presented to it—a romance in real life. There had been the usual horrible preliminaries, into which it is not necessary for me to enter, before the warrant was produced for Innocent's arrest. Poor Amanda's last repose had been disturbed to furnish evidence, though, owing to the lapse of time, with little or no result; but the circumstantial evidence had seemed so strong to the magistrates before whom Innocent was first examined as to warrant her immediate committal. All that the public knew in her favour was mere supposition and hearsay, while the facts on the other side were very apparent. One dismal feature in the case, however, which appalled all who heard of it, was that while all Innocent's friends were called for the prosecution, it was by some cursed spite of fate only her enemies, with one exception, who could be called for her defence. Frederick was the only witness capable of saying anything about Amanda's death who would not be the personal enemy of the unhappy girl, and every one was aware under what difficulties, and with what prejudices against him, the man whom the public supposed the cause of the whole would appear before a British jury. In such cases women have the best of it. A woman who has been the cause of a deadly struggle between two men is not discredited, but rather gains a fictitious interest by it. But a man for whom two women have appeared to contend bears always a miserable aspect. Men despise him, and women hate him; his evidence in favour of a culprit is worth nothing, for he is supposed bound in honour to perjure himself, if necessary, to shield the creature who has risked her life for him. The public, as was natural, regarded Frederick with scorn and disgust. And yet, with the exception of Frederick, only Innocent's enemies, the father, the nurse, the women servants, all committed to proceed against her, could be called for her defence—a thought which might well have appalled the stoutest heart.

Jenny Eastwood had started at once in search of the doctor, whose evidence it was believed was of so much importance, and who had

gone, not to the Colonies, as Frederick said, but to Transylvania, and other remote parts of Europe, with a scientific expedition. It was hoped that he might be brought back in time for the trial. And the anxious days went on—terrible days, but so full of eager consultation, of anxious reviewing of every circumstance, of the efforts made by all to keep each other up, and to support the poor girl herself, whose mind certainly seemed to weaken under the effects of her confinement, that they fled as if on wings. The unhappy family living at the prison gates, going to and fro constantly, identifying themselves with the poor young prisoner, yet probably destined to prove her guilt, became the object of much public compassion. The newspapers enlarged greatly on the attractive theme, and some graphic and eloquent journals went out of their way to paint this striking picture of family devotion and suffering. But there were some facts which even the *Semaphore* itself was not aware of, which deepened every stroke of pain. Batty pursued the prosecution like a fiend, calling, as I have said, Innocent's dearest friends to convict her, to prove her foolish love, her wild expressions of dislike, her distracted avowal of guilt; and the case, thus complicated and embittered, would naturally fall to be tried by the youngest judge on the bench, the well-known and justly-celebrated Mr. Justice Molyneux. Could there be any bitterer drop in that cup of tears?

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE TRIAL.

THE trial of Lady Longueville for the wilful murder of Amanda Eastwood came on about the 2nd of April, after some unimportant business had been got over. The trial was one which was not only interesting in itself, but doubly attractive to the district in which the Eastwoods had their ancestral home, and where Miss Vane had set up so remarkable an establishment. Sterborne, like every other place, had very strong opinions about the semi-conventual life of the community which had possession of the High Lodge. Some wished the sisters and their strange lady abbess well, thinking that, whether wisely or not, they were women really attempting a great piece of work while so many of us content ourselves with saying that work ought to be done. But a great many were virulent against Miss Vane, especially among the lower classes, and these felt themselves almost flattered in their *amour propre* by

the discovery that a niece or a relative of the mistress of the High Lodge was to be tried for her life. Many of them thought it served her right, many more that it was the natural result of nunneries, and that, on the whole, it was rather a good thing that light should thus be thrown on the doings habitual to them. Of others, and better-informed people, many were curious on behalf of the Eastwoods, and some on behalf of the Vanes. Sterrington, the county town, was sufficiently near Sterborne to be affected by the strong feeling on the question which naturally existed there: and the county itself attended the Assizes almost in a body, half-glad and half-sorry that Innocent had never belonged to its "set." Batty's daughter, too, was very well known in the district, her beauty, her violent temper, and the match she had made having each and all of them attracted public attention to her. Thus the ordinary attractions of a trial in which the romantic element was involved, and dark stories of love and mystery promised to be unfolded, were enhanced by everything that local interest could add to it. The court was thronged. There was as distinguished an audience as if the Queen herself had come to Sterrington, or as if Titiens or Patti had been about to sing; and the anxiety to get places was more eager than it would have been on either of these occasions, for it was a real tragedy, at which all the good people intended to assist, and which thrilled them with the liveliest emotions of sympathy, horror, and fear.

Thus the court was crowded from an early hour in the morning when people went to take their places as for a spectacle; every seat was filled, almost from the floor to the roof, the Town Hall was one throng and sea of faces, and it was with difficulty that the judge himself made his way to the bench. Within the last week it had been expected that Mr. Justice Waterhouse, Molyneux's colleague, would try the case; but the day before Sir Edward Waterhouse took ill, and there was no escape for the other, whose usually good-humoured countenance looked gloomy enough on this particular occasion. When Innocent appeared, who was the chief object of the popular curiosity, there was that thrill through the place which testified to the tension of excited nerves and highly-strained feelings. She came in very quietly, with a wondering, scared look in her eyes, but no other sentiment. She was not abashed, nor afraid to meet the gaze of so many. Why should she shrink from their gaze? Innocent had been by many supposed to be shy, but she had never really been shy—she had not enough imagination for that painful feeling. Therefore she was not abashed nor shamefaced, though a faint additional colour came upon her colourless face. Her eyes had a look of fright because she did not know what was going to happen to her, but of the scene she saw, or the people who looked at her, Innocent was not afraid. She was in the same dress of clinging white cashmere which she had worn on the day

when she was arrested, and had the little gray-blue cloak upon her shoulders. A very light little bonnet, more like a white veil arranged about her head, and throwing up her pathetic face against its white background—a bonnet which had been made by a fanciful milliner to suit the strange beauty of the poor young bride—was on her head. There had been many consultations about this dress. Mrs. Eastwood had desired that her niece should wear black, as being less subject "to be remarked;" but Innocent had been unusually obstinate. She had carried her point, and accordingly made her appearance in a costume which was quite bridelike, and certain "to be remarked." Nelly sat near the bar, as close to it as she could be permitted to place herself, so that Innocent might see her, and feel the support of a friend at hand if her heart failed her. Sir Alexis was on the other side. She was surrounded at least by those who loved her best, and perhaps no young woman ever stood in such a terrible position who was less deeply impressed by it. She believed herself to be guilty, but her mind was not weighed down by the sense of guilt. She had a vague consciousness that something terrible might be done to her, she scarcely knew what; but she was not given to forecasting the future, and for the present moment perhaps Innocent was the least painfully excited of all the family. She could do nothing, she was in the hands of those people who surrounded her, billows of faces which indeed she did not know, but who looked on her, some with visible pity, some even with tears, few with an angry aspect. When the jury came in to whom she had been told to look as the arbitrators of her fate, none of them appeared to Innocent to be angry; and from the presiding seat, where sat the man to whom everybody looked, and to whom the privilege of finding fault with everybody seemed allotted, there appeared to her a countenance she recognized, not awful, scarcely severe. And her husband and Nelly were close by her, to take care of, to speak for, to prevent her from being scolded. She knew vaguely that there was something worse than scolding to be apprehended, but poor Innocent had never known anything worse, and therefore her fears were not lively on this point. To be sure she had already been imprisoned, which was worse than scolding; but the effect the prison had upon her was much more that of highly disagreeable lodgings than anything worse. She did not like them, she longed to go home; but still she had been brought there in preparation for this trial, and the very unpleasant room in which she had to live was one of the circumstances rather than any positive infliction in itself. She came into the court with these subdued feelings, and looked round her wistfully with an appealing, pitiful look, in which, however, there was neither terror nor overwhelming shame. Nelly felt the shame a great deal more deeply, and so did Miss Vane, who was trying hard to accept and subdue it as a mortification of the flesh, but who kept murmuring to herself in

her corner, "A Vane! one of our family!" with humiliation unspeakable. Innocent did not feel the humiliation. She was scared, but not abashed, and as she got used to the faces, her eyes grew more and more piteous, wistful, appealing. When would they make up their minds, all these strangers, and say to her what had to be said, and do to her what had to be done, and let her go home?

Before I begin this part of my story, I have to confess to the gentle reader that I was not there, and that I am very little learned in the mode of conducting such tragical inquiries. Everybody knows how confused are the narratives which those who have taken part in such a scene give to the historian. Sometimes one informant will lose all general sense of what was going on in a mere detail, or another burst forth into laments of mournful shame over a foolish answer he or she has given, instead of making the unfortunate narrator aware what that answer was. Under these disadvantages I have to set forth this scene, which is the most important in poor Innocent's history, and I trust the kind reader who knows better will forgive me when I go wrong.

There was some difficulty to start with in getting Innocent to utter the plea of "Not Guilty," a difficulty which had been foreseen, and which indeed could only be overcome by the exertions of all her friends, who had exacted a pledge from her that she should say the words, which were, they explained eagerly, a "matter of form," and profoundly true, at all events, so far as her intention went. All her immediate supporters drew a long breath when this danger was safely surmounted. It was, indeed, more than a relief, for the pathetic way in which she replied to the question, "What is your name?" by her ordinary, simple answer, "I am Innocent," went to the hearts of the multitude, and produced one of those altogether unreasoning but most powerful moments of popular sympathy which transcend all argument. A distinct pause had to be made to permit the general emotion to subside before the first formal evidence could be heard, and vain and foolish hopes of foolish acquittal by acclamation swelled the breast of Nelly, at least, who, poor girl, with old Alice alone to support, her mother being a witness, sat searching for sympathy with her anxious eyes through all the eager crowd.

The first important witness called was Aunty, who came into the witness-box in her deep mourning, subdued yet triumphant, feeling something of that fierce pleasure in having the life of another in her power, which seems to move humanity so strangely. She was by nature a kind soul. Under any other circumstances she would have cried over Innocent, and followed her fate with hysterical interest. But now she could not keep herself from feeling a certain elation—a certain satisfaction and superiority—at having the girl's

life, as it were, in her hands, and being able to crush the family who had been unfriendly to Amanda—the "other side." She came fortified with a large white handkerchief and a large double smelling-bottle, ruby and gold, which had been one of Amanda's properties, picked up during the unhappy visit to Frederick's house. Aunty, otherwise Miss Johnson, proved all the particulars of the death in her examination-in-chief. She related the unexpected arrival of Innocent—the sudden determination of Amanda to be attended by her husband's young cousin—and the preliminary scene in the afternoon, before dinner. The witness had no intention of saying anything untrue, but unconsciously she gave to her account of Innocent's behaviour in the sick-room an air of hostility and evil purpose.

"Mrs. Eastwood was in so little danger at this moment that you could feel it right to confide her to the charge of a young girl?" said the counsel for the prosecution.

"Bless you, she was in no danger at all!" said Aunty. "She was as she had been often and often before."

"And the young lady came, knowing she was ill, to help to nurse her?"

"Mrs. Frederick didn't take it in that way; she wanted no new nurses; she made the young lady stay with her to keep her from Mr. Eastwood, as was a gentleman with taking ways. That is the truth, if I should die for it! It was thought by his poor wife, and many more than her, as the prisoner was fonder of Mr. Frederick than ought to be between cousins——"

"I must appeal to the Court," said Mr. Serjeant Ryder, "that this is the introduction of an entirely new element not at all to the purpose."

"If my learned brother will wait a little he will see that it is very much to the purpose," said the other. "I must really be allowed to examine my witnesses in my own way. I have no doubt he will afterwards make them as uncomfortable as possible in his cross-examination.—The deceased had, then, a strong reason for retaining the prisoner with her?"

"As strong as a woman can have," said Aunty. "She knew as her husband was no better than making love to his cousin. I have seen it myself over and over. She kept knocking all the time of dinner for them to come up. And then they went into the garden. My poor dear was angry. I don't know who wouldn't have been; lying there ill, not able to move, and knowing as your husband was carrying on in the garden with a silly young girl."

"It must be acknowledged that the position was disagreeable. When the prisoner was finally summoned did she show symptoms of displeasure? Did she resist the call?"

"She was not one as showed much of anything," said the witness. "She did something or said something as quieted poor 'Manda. I

was sent away for quietness, as I told you, sir; and the prisoner got the book as I had been reading, and read her to sleep."

Then there followed a description of the next two hours, to which the court listened with rapt attention. Aunty was not eloquent; but she had a homely natural flow of words, and for this part at least of her story the veracity of an eye-witness. She described the silence which gradually fell over the room—how the patient dropped to sleep, not all at once, but after repeated dozes, as was her custom, during which time the reading went on; how at last all was still—how she, half dozing too in the passage outside, went softly, and, looking in at the door, saw Innocent also asleep, or feigning sleep, with her head on her breast, the book lying on her knee, and the little table, with all its medicine bottles, illuminated by the lamp beside her. This silence lasted so far as she could judge for about an hour and a half, when she was suddenly aroused by a loud outburst of voices from the sick room. "I was not frightened—not to say more frightened than usual," said Aunty. "She often did wake up like that, all in a flurry. I heard the prisoner's voice, so I know she was awake, and Mrs. Frederick a-crying and screaming for something. No, I wasn't frightened even then; that was her way; when she did not get what she wanted that very moment, she would scream and go into a passion. It was through never being crossed. The house was all still, everybody gone to bed but me; I heard the Minster clock strike, and then I could hear her calling for her drops. I couldn't make out nothing else. Then I heard a moving about and a rustling, and then all at once, all in a moment, everything was still. I can't say as I took fright even then, for now and again the passion would go off like that all in a moment. I waited and waited, listening; at first I thought as she had gone to sleep again. I said to myself, Now she's dropped off, she'll have a good sleep, and the worst of the night's over."

"Did anything occur then to excite your suspicions?" said the counsel, as the witness paused.

"Oh, sir, nothing as I could put into words," cried Aunty. "There was a creepy sort of feeling, as went all over you, like as if it was a chill, cold and quiet, both at once. I felt it, but I didn't say nothing till Mary the cook came slipping down-stairs in a fright. Then I took fright as well, for she was always subject to fainting fits was poor 'Manda, and the doctor had warned us. I dashed into the room, and there was the poor darling lying back with her mouth open, and her big blue eyes wide and staring, and oh! I'll never forget that night as long as I live."

The witness hid her face in her handkerchief. The feeling was perfectly spontaneous and natural, and it affected the audience as natural feeling always does.

"Compose yourself," said the counsel soothingly. "Take your

time; no one wishes to hurry you. What was the demeanour of the prisoner during the sad event?"

"I hadn't no time to think of her," said Aunty, sobbing. She stood about, that's all I know, while Mary called up the other servants, and we tried cold water, and everything I could think of. I can't tell you either how long it was before I ran to my poor child, or how long it was before I saw that nothing was of any good. It felt like hours and hours. The prisoner stood about in the way of the maids, and never did nothing to help us. I think she asked me what was the matter, but I can't swear to it. The only thing I can swear to was as I saw her stealing quietly out of the room when nobody was looking. I thought, perhaps, she was going to call some one. I never thought as she intended to run away."

"And that was the last you saw of her? She did not wait to see Mr. Eastwood? She did not make any explanation, or offer any help?"

"Not a thing, sir, not a word, as I'm a living woman. She went right off like a ghost. Mary, the cook, saw her a-standing at the door in the moonlight, and she says——"

"May I ask if Mary, the cook, is to appear as a witness?" asked Mr. Ryder.

"Certainly, a most important witness. We will, therefore, wait for Mary's own appearance to hear what she said.—In the meantime, I suppose, you perceived the opiate had been administered?"

"That wasn't till some time after," said Aunty, with a little confusion. "There was the glass on the bed as had rolled out of her poor dear hand, and a drop or two of black stuff on the coverlet."

"Was the opiate black?"

"Not as it ought to have been given," said Aunty; "many and many's the time I give it, so I ought to know. It didn't ought to have coloured the water——"

"You did not attach so much importance to these circumstances at the time—for what reason? The deceased, you have informed us, was not dangerously ill?"

"It was along of them fainting fits," said Aunty. "She was subject to them—the doctors had always warned us as she might go off in one any day, if we didn't take care. We had to be very careful not to cross her. As long as she was at home she was never crossed; but when a lady's married it's different. I had been frightened for the faintings so long that I never thought of nothing else—that's the truth. If I'd had my wits about me, I'd have seen in a minute; but being as it was, with all them warnings against the faints, and knowing as she had been crossed badly, and in a temper just before——the other was never put into my head in a moment like; though it would have been, if I'd had my wits about me," she concluded, in a tone of defiance, facing the eager listeners

round her. The wary prosecution perceived coming danger, and dismissed her with soothing compliments.

"You have given your evidence with great distinctness; that will do, Miss Johnson. For the present I will not trouble you any more."

Mr. Serjeant Ryder was peremptory in ordinary life, but he could be very suave and sweet to a witness. He began his cross-examination with the same compliments.

"You have given your evidence with so much distinctness," he said, "and discharged your onerous duty so well, that I am sure there are a few further particulars with which you can favour us.—May I ask, for instance, how your suspicions were first directed against the accused?"

This was an embarrassing question, with which the witness was scarcely prepared to cope; but she got through it by a vigorous exercise of mother wit, and told, not ineffectively, how Jane's story cleared up to her many difficulties which had dwelt in her mind in respect to Amanda's death, and how she felt at once that a flood of light had been poured upon that event which, ever since it happened, she had been brooding over, feeling that there was something inexplainable in it.

"I saw it all as clear as daylight," she said; and as here again the feeling was natural, she carried the audience with her, as every practised eye could see.

"Still you felt no necessity at the time for any other explanation except the fainting fits to which the deceased was liable. How long had she been subject to these fainting fits?"

"From a child," said Aunty. "When she was a baby she had to have everything she wanted, or she'd have cried herself into fits. So every doctor told us; it was not her fault, poor dear. It was something as affected her heart. She could not put up with things as other folks have got to put up with. She had very fine feelings, had poor Amanda," the witness said, once more hiding her face in her handkerchief. The feeling, however, was fictitious here, and consequently did not tell.

"But it is sometimes highly inconvenient to have very fine feelings," said Serjeant Ryder. "You have said that she did not approve of the friendship between her husband and his cousin. Was this the chief cause of the excitement which brought on those fainting fits?——"

"Oh, bless you, sir, anything would do," cried the witness incautiously. "I have seen her fly out at myself for opening the door too quick or too slow, or for putting a thing down on a table or for pinning my collar wrong. It didn't matter what it was!"——Here Aunty discovered her mistake, and added falteringly,—"I mean since she was married. When a lady is married she is in the way of being put out, more than a young girl at home in her father's house——"

"How is that, now,—tell me,—I should like some information on that subject," said the bland lawyer. "Is it because a lady who is married gets so much more of her own way? or less?"

"Lord, sir, what a question,—less of course. She was never put out, nor allowed to be put out when she was at home with us; but when a girl goes into the world, and has to be troubled with servants, and bills, and all that,—not to say with a husband as would be enough to try a saint——"

(Episodes of this kind are amusing and exhilarating, I suppose, to both the witnesses and the counsel, as well as to the audience, whose feelings are thus preserved from undue tension,—but they are somewhat hard upon the persons principally concerned,—Innocent's friends looked on with blank and rigid faces at this encounter of wits.)

"Are we to understand, then, that the deceased was cruelly tried by her husband?"

"I don't know what you mean by cruelly tried,—between cruelty as you can go to law for, and the way a man ought to behave as is fond of his wife, there's a deal of difference," said the witness, feeling that she had the best of it. "All I have got to say against him is, that he was aggravating in his ways,—most gentlemen is."

At this there was a laugh,—notwithstanding the pale, piteous face of Innocent at the bar—notwithstanding the tremendous issues involved to a creature so young and so simple—and notwithstanding all the blank faces, almost awful in their indignation, of her friends, the court and the jury relieved their feelings by momentary laughter. Mr. Justice Molyneux kindly allowed his features to relax; even in the midst of a tragedy it is well to have a little buffoonery to lighten the strain. The cross-examination went on, and Serjeant Ryder elicited many details of the life of Frederick and Amanda, which proved conclusively that no suppositious Rosamond was necessary to awaken her jealousy, and that indeed jealousy itself, or any such intense feeling, was not needed to rouse the excitement which was followed by those dangerous faints. A large proportion of the audience present had some knowledge beforehand of Amanda Batty's temper, so that the revelation was very complete; and it was a highly-interesting revelation, and gratified the curious. Every popular assembly is greedy of such details of those exceptional human lives which are separated by misfortune or crime from the decorum of ordinary privacy, and delivered over to the gaze of the world. But though it was thus interesting as a revelation, it did not advance the cause of the prisoner at the bar, whose conduct in that mysterious moment when she was with the sick woman was neither explained nor affected by any of the details of Amanda's previous life. Much less interesting to the general mind were Serjeant Ryder's attempts

to elicit distinct information from the witness as to the time which had elapsed between Amanda's last outburst of passion and the moment when Aunty rushed into the room—"It felt like hours," she said, and she thought, but could not swear, that the hour which she heard strike while Amanda was talking must have been eleven; or perhaps the chimes for the half-hour after ten. This discussion, however, wearied the public which had been allowed to taste more exciting fare.

After Miss Johnson's examination terminated, the maids were called to confirm her evidence, one of whom gave a picturesque account of the sudden appearance of Innocent at the open door in a flood of moonlight, while she was looking out for the doctor. She was herself standing in the deep shadow on the other side, looking down the lane by which the doctor must come. She described her own fright and wonder as the noiseless figure paused, looked round, and then glided along through the moonlight, until the next bank of shadow swallowed it up. She thought it was a ghost, and could not scream for very terror; and it was not until she knew that the young lady had disappeared that she identified the noiseless, gliding figure. The maids both thought Innocent's disappearance thus very odd, but they both confessed that they had given no importance to it at the time. Nor were either of these witnesses clear about the time. One was of opinion with Aunty that it was eleven o'clock which struck; while the other, who had not heard the clock, concluded the hour to be later. These were the chief witnesses to the event itself, for neither Batty nor Frederick were called. The former had held himself ready up to the last moment, but his vindictive impulse was so visible and so tremendous that the gentleman who held his brief had almost thrown it up after an interview with him, and had insisted upon excluding him from the witness-box.

Mrs. Eastwood was then called. This poor lady had been more unhappy than I can tell ever since she was aware that her testimony would be called for against poor Innocent. What shall I say?" she had asked, with clasped hands and streaming eyes, of Innocent's counsel, from whom first she learned the real gravity of her position.

"Tell the truth, ma'am," that functionary had said sharply; for he was prepossessed against the aunt, who had, he thought, endeavoured to keep Innocent from speaking freely, and who had, no doubt, forced the poor girl into a marriage which destroyed what little mind she had. Poor Mrs. Eastwood tried to dry her tears and smother her indignation. And now the dreadful moment had come when she must tell that truth in all its naked bareness, without the explanations which she knew changed its character so completely. Her appearance was for the public at least the most exciting event of the day.

"You remember the morning of the 21st of October?" said the counsel for the prosecution.

"Oh, indeed, alas! I do," said the poor woman, the tears coming to her eyes. This injudicious warmth of assent was indicated to her as something wrong by the sharp cough of Mr. Serjeant Ryder, who, however, did not look at her; but Sir Alexis did, and Nelly, who clasped her hands and fixed an entreating glance on her mother, full of unutterable things. These warnings did, I think, less good than harm, for they confused the unfortunate witness beyond description.

"Something remarkable, then, happened on that morning? The prisoner was absent from home, so far as I understand, on the day before?"

"She was on a visit at her cousin's, near Sterborne," said Mrs. Eastwood, "or at least so I thought."

"I see from the depositions," continued the counsel, "that the prisoner arrived suddenly at your house on the morning of the 21st. Will you be good enough to inform the court of the circumstances attending her return home?"

Mrs. Eastwood paused; she gave an anxious look round, to her daughter, to Sir Alexis, finally to the familiar countenance of the judge, who seemed to look at her with that twinkle in his eye of incipient sarcasm and amusement which she had encountered before. She met, too, from a distant corner the frowning, peremptory look of Frederick, who, being far off, raised a finger to her in warning —warning of what? She drew a long breath of reluctance and fear.

"I hope I need not tell a lady of your education," said the counsel peremptorily, "that hesitation can only harm the unfortunate prisoner. No prevarication will help her. Everybody must feel for your very painful position; but you are pledged, I must remind you, to conceal nothing, to inform the court of the truth. The prisoner came home suddenly on the morning of Sunday, the 21st of October. You did not expect her, believing her to be safe with her relation?"

"I did not expect her," said Mrs. Eastwood, faltering; "she was to have stayed for some weeks; still, as she was a little peculiar in her ways of acting, and very fond of home, and frightened of strangers, I should not have been surprised, at any time——"

"You were surprised, however, on this particular morning? Come, madam, the court is waiting. I understand you were not up when the prisoner burst suddenly into your room?"

"She did not burst into my room at all," said Mrs. Eastwood with indignation. "When I opened my eyes, roused by the sound of the door opening, I saw her by my side."

"This was at a very early hour in the morning, before the other members of the household were up?"

"It was about seven o'clock. The housemaid had let my poor child in as soon as she went down-stairs. She came to me, naturally—"

"And when you woke under these unusual circumstances, and saw her by your bedside, what did the prisoner say?"

Again Mrs. Eastwood paused. She threw once more a bewildered look round the court. Then recovering herself, she turned with the dignity of sorrow to the judge himself. "My lord," she said firmly, "I don't know what to do. The words I have to repeat will shock and startle every one who hears them; they will convey a false impression—they will create a prejudice——"

"The witness has no power of choice in the matter," said the judge. "It is for the jury to decide what is true and what is false. The facts are what we must exact from you."

Mrs. Eastwood grew very pale, so pale that all the women in the court believed she was going to faint, and the greater part of them grew sick with sympathy. "Then," she said, in a very low voice, which, however, was heard everywhere, so great was the silence, "if I must tell it, this was what she said: 'I have killed Frederick's wife.'"

A long-drawn, sobbing breath of spent excitement, so universal as to reach to a subdued but distinct sound, came from the crowd. The witness stood for a moment leaning upon the front of the box, seeing nothing but a mist of white faces—her brain whirling, her mind confused, with the shock. It did not occur to her—how should it?—that her reluctance, her paleness, her misery, were all so many additions to the force of her testimony. What more terrible witness could have appeared against Innocent than one out of whom this terrible testimony had to be dragged as from the bottom of her heart?

Some few moments elapsed before she knew very well what she was saying after this. She replied mechanically to the questions put to her, but she did not wake up to a full sense of what she was doing till she found herself narrating her visit to Sterborne on the next day. Then as she recovered her senses gradually, and began to discriminate once more out of the sea of faces those which interested herself most deeply, she awoke to the importance of all she was saying. She threw herself into this easier narrative. She remembered everything—her confusion and bewilderment passed away. It is so much easier to recollect, to explain, to record fully, events which are not against you, which are rather in your favour! Her account of all she saw and heard was so clear that it did much to neutralize the damning effect of her former testimony. Yet what could neutralize such a confession—"I have killed Frederick's wife"? Why should the girl say such a thing, was asked on every side, if it was not true?

Jane, the housemaid—the cause of the trial—the traitor who had betrayed Innocent, came next to corroborate Mrs. Eastwood's testimony; but with so very different an intention! and Jane produced a little reaction in Innocent's favour by her evident desire to exaggerate, and anxiety to improve upon her former evidence. The lawyers fought over her for some time, and Mr. Serjeant Ryder managed to elicit several facts very detrimental to Jane's private character, although noways affecting her story, for when she was done that story remained plain enough.

"I have killed Frederick's wife!" These words were simple enough to remain in any one's memory, and terrible enough to require no aggravation. "She was a-kneeling by the bedside," said Jane, "holding her aunt by the arm. Neither on 'em saw me. She had something clasped tight in her hand——"

"Something in her hand? What was that?" the counsel for the prosecution demanded eagerly.

"I don't know what it was," said Jane. "No, I didn't name it before. I didn't think as it could be of any importance. I saw as she had her hand clasped tight when I let her in; but I couldn't see what it was——"

Mrs. Eastwood was recalled, and desired to explain this previously unnoted circumstance. She came back into the witness-box very pale, knowing by instinct what was coming. And bit by bit the damning parts were dragged from her. Faltering and pale, and reluctant, she described the little phial which Innocent herself had held out to her, to prove her wild story, and admitted that she had put it away, feeling it to be of importance. Afterwards, when her drawers were put in order, some one, "by accident," had thrown it away. It had been done against her will. She had been much distressed—but it was by accident. To this story she clung with a kind of blank despair. All that she knew when she tottered out of the box was that she had not committed Frederick, or involved him in the matter. But it would be impossible to exaggerate the fatal effect of this confused and faltering story. For the first time the audience and the jury began to believe in Innocent's guilt——

There was a momentary instinctive pause after this momentous piece of evidence, and then the doctors were called who had examined poor Amanda's remains. Into the terrible details of such an examination I need not enter. They had been able to add nothing to the elucidation of the mystery; time had extinguished all trace of the poison, if poison there was. The only medical witness whose evidence was of any importance was young Mr. Sweteson, of Sterborne, who had been the assistant partner of the doctor whom Jenny Eastwood was now pursuing across Europe—and had once or twice visited Mrs. Frederick Eastwood. He was aware that she had suffered from a disease of the heart, which gave his former principal much anxiety. For his own part, the

young man said, with the confidence of youth, he had not shared that alarm. This young doctor had no prejudice against Innocent; he was, on the contrary, touched by her pathetic history. But he was on "the other side." Though the witnesses at such a trial are called in the interest of truth only, and though humanity, justice, and natural feeling all urge upon them the necessity of bearing their testimony without bias, it is, I think, certain that every man summoned for the prosecution has a natural tendency to make the worst, and every man summoned for the defence a disposition to make the best, of the case. The present witness yielded quite unconsciously to this natural impulse. He did not agree, he said (not informing the court how small were his opportunities of forming an opinion), with his former colleague. He believed Mrs. Frederick Eastwood's complaint to be chiefly fanciful—the vapours of a foolish and high-tempered woman—dangerous enough to the comfort of her family, if you liked, but not dangerous to her, unless indeed she had broken a blood-vessel in one of her fits of passion, he added, somewhat contemptuously, or done herself bodily harm in some other way. Serjeant Ryder examined this witness closely as to the time necessary for the operation of an overdose of opium, a question in which the court in general did not show itself greatly interested. The day had been warm, the court was very full, the interest of the great audience waned as the drowsy afternoon drooped towards evening; and it became apparent that no decision could be arrived at. The cross-examination of the doctor delayed the proceedings in a way which the audience thought tiresome, and which puzzled the honest jury, who did not see what was meant by it. The same feeling of weariness which had come upon the audience in general, and which was evinced by all those restless movements, coughs, and flutterings of going and coming, which prove to every public speaker when interest begins to fail, had come, I suppose, upon Innocent too, though she had not followed the proceedings with any intellectual attention to speak of. She was roused, however—I cannot tell how—by all that had occurred. What Aunty had said of her, and what the maids had said of her, had penetrated vaguely, taking some time to do so, into her torpid brain. And quite suddenly, while the young doctor and the counsel for the defence were still carrying on their duel on the scientific question, the whole assembly was suddenly thrilled, electrified, galvanized back again into interest. The people behind stood up, those in front bent forward, the official persons roused themselves in a sudden flutter, the usher of the court rushed to the rescue, the counsel started to their feet in dismay, the very judge on the bench began to telegraph wildly. The cause of this commotion was that Innocent herself had spoken. She was called to on all hands, as if the soft girlish voice could revolutionize the state. "Silence!" "Prisoner at the bar, you cannot be allowed to speak." "You must

be silent, Lady Longueville." "Innocent, hush! hush! you must not speak!"—all these addresses were made to her loud and low, in every accent of authority, persuasion, and tenderness. Innocent took no notice. She went on—her clear, youthful voice sounding through theirs as the song of a bird sounds through the clang of an explosion. She paid no attention to the looks any more than the words addressed to her. Simple as she was, I suppose the thrill of sudden interest about her—the immediate turning of every eye upon her—stimulated and encouraged her mind. She put out her hand and gently pushed away the woman from the prison who attended her, and whose zeal to stop her was vehement. She said what she had to say through all the cries and remonstrances addressed to her. Whosoever does so singly and steadily is sure, I suppose, of a hearing at the end.

"You have asked them things they do not know," she said; "why do not you ask me? I know more. It was I that was with her. I will tell you if you will listen to me. Please tell them to be still, please! for what I want is to save you trouble. No, please go away! I will go with you when I have told them. (This was to the prison matron, who had again clutched at her.) It is quite true, except that I never wanted to be with her, to be in the room at all. When I went up to her without Frederick she was very angry and scolded. I said to her, 'Do not be angry, it does not hurt any one so much as you. They say it will kill you, if you do not stop; and it cannot kill any one else.' Then she was quiet, and I read to her; and then she fell asleep, and I suppose I fell asleep too. Mr. Molyneux, will you tell them to be quiet, please! I woke when she shook me, holding my arm. I tried to drop the drops for her, as she told me. I tried twice, and emptied it out, for I could not. Then I went again close to the bed to try if I could do it —(Oh, silence, please! silence, as you say.) She caught hold of my arm again. She shook me. Almost all the bottle went into the glass. She took it out of my hand and drank it. That is how it was. Yes, I will be silent now, if you wish it. I will go away if you wish it. That is how it was."

The cries all died into silence as Innocent's voice ended. Her unlawful interposition had woke the hubbub, and it ceased when she ceased. Not half the audience could possibly have heard, but that half was in wild excitement, while the rest, who had not, struggled with equally wild determination to get better places, or to ask from those who had heard it what she had said. An indescribable scene of confusion followed. The afternoon air was stifling and heavy, the long day was at an end, a thunder-cloud had come over the sun, which was near its setting, and darkened one side of the court-house, while the light came in pale and weird on the other, pouring in a gleam of illumination from the pallid sky out of which the storm was about to break. This gleam fell full

upon Innocent's pale face, still tremulous with the excitement—if excitement it could be called—of her self-revelation, and upon that of Nelly, who stood up unawares in her agitation near her, and whose likeness to her cousin—invisible in happier moments—came out now with the most curious force. After that one amazed, affrighted pause, which was not unlike the pause before the storm outside, renewed cries of "Silence!" and "Clear the court!" were heard. The whole scene was like the brewing of a popular tumult.

"Remove the prisoner,—the court will adjourn till to-morrow," said the powerful voice of the judge, and the papers added that he made an indignant remonstrance as to the failure of the officials in keeping order, and the extraordinary breach of decorum which they had just witnessed. But if such remarks were made, no one heard them. The court broke up. Mr. Justice Molyneux, with a solemn face, went to his solemn lodging, devoting Innocent in his heart to all the infernal gods, and groaning over the unhappy destiny which had brought her case into his hands, while the streets about suddenly filled with a buzzing crowd, all the inns swarming with groups eager for the discussion of the case—and their dinner. Torrents of rain, pouring down out of the black skies, soon swept from the streets all the eager clusters of people who discussed out of doors the one only subject of the day. Carriages stood under shelter through the storm, or lingered in the courtyards of the hotels in the High Street, till the worst of the thunder was over; but, going or coming on the ways, there was nothing talked of, nor thought of, but Innocent. Was she innocent?—was she guilty? Was it accident, a mistake, the misadventure of a frightened child; or was it the crime of a wildly passionate woman, to secure to herself the man she loved? In all Sterrington there was nothing talked of but the trial. The entire population fought over it, taking different sides, and waiting with an excitement which had something pleasurable in it for the morrow which should decide.

How the Eastwoods and the Vanes waited for that morrow, crowding together in the little sitting-room opposite the prison, one or another of the women sitting constantly at the window, watching with eyes full of tears the other high window opposite, with messengers coming and going from the lawyers—from the railway and telegraph office, to see if there was any news from Jenny—I cannot venture to record. But to tell how Innocent spent the night is easy. She slept—such sleep as comes to the beloved of heaven—and woke in the morning with a smile upon her lips, thinking she was in the little church of the Spina and saying "Our Father" before she woke.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE SECOND DAY.

NEXT day the Town Hall was more crowded than ever. The sleep of the town—I might say of the county also—had been uneasy and broken. The place was torn asunder by faction as it never before had been known to be. The Longuevillists were the strongest party; the Battyists the most virulent. The one insisted upon poor Innocent's youth, beauty, strange fortunes, and pitiful, appealing looks, which they said were enough to melt the heart of a stone. The other cried out indignantly that had she been a poor girl, and not Lady Longueville, all this pity would have been spared, that nobody would have cared what happened to her, that she would have been left to her fate. The first were ready to forgive her love for Frederick, which everybody on both sides took for granted, partly from the evidence, partly from those unspoken, unconscious currents of rumour which come on every wind; and, indeed, many of Innocent's partisans held in their secret heart that it was quite possible she might have done it, but forgave her for the sake of her sweet face. Everybody accordingly rushed to the scene of action almost by daylight next morning. There were people who had been sitting there for hours before the judge made his appearance, to secure a seat. Miss Vane, who had gained a victory over herself during the course of the previous day, who had accepted the mortification as for her good, and decided to her satisfaction that poor Innocent's terrible misfortune was "a judgment" on her own pride, took heart of grace to accompany Nelly to her place near the bar, thus declaring openly that she too "stood by" her cousin. Nelly, who had grown very pale and hollow-eyed, for whom this trial had involved more than appeared, whose eyes, when she could spare them from Innocent, cast furtive glances through the crowd, wondering if it was possible that any one who had ever said he loved her could keep away from her now, was very glad of Miss Vane's support. I doubt, however, whether Innocent was so much as conscious of it. She had fallen into a passive state, and stood at the bar with the early morning sunshine falling upon her girlish, pallid countenance, like an image of silent Patience, leaning upon the rail against which she stood, declining to take the seat they offered her. The weary strain was becoming too much for the girl's immature and delicate frame. She did not look at either judge or jury that day, but fixed her eyes upon a bit of blue sky which appeared through a window, and stood unconscious of anything else, gazing into that—longing to be out of doors, out of this close, crowded place, out of the surrounding walls, the throng of people,

and the solitude which alternated with that publicity. "When do you think it will be over? When do you think they will let me go?" she said, in the voice which had grown more plaintive and childlike than ever, to the woman who stood by her.

"Hush, my lady! you mustn't speak to-day, or you'll get us all into trouble," the woman replied. Yet Innocent repeated the question at intervals through the weary day. How bright it was, that gleam of sky!—how pleasant it would be to be out, to be in the sunshine, among the flowers at Longueville, or, sweeter still, in the Lady's Walk, with the history book, and the primroses making all the grass golden. These were the thoughts that went through her mind as she stood through the second weary day, grown too weary to attend, thinking only of the primroses, while she was being tried for her life.

The case for the prosecution had not been closed. The remaining evidence was trifling in substance, but horribly important in scope. It was chiefly made up of bits of conversation in which Innocent had expressed her love for Frederick—and her dislike of Frederick's wife. The former suppositious sentiment was very easy to prove, and the poor girl had never hesitated to express the latter feeling. One of the witnesses was a Sister from the High Lodge, who gave her evidence very reluctantly, but with almost as damning an effect as that of Mrs. Eastwood on the previous day, for Innocent had unfolded to this lady her conviction that such people should not live. On the close of her evidence the counsel for the prosecution spoke. He drew a touching picture of the poor young wife deserted by a fickle husband, hearing his steps below as he walked and talked with another, yet subduing her painful feeling, receiving that other with kindness, and with touching confidence admitting her to her sick room. Then he pictured the course of thought which might have arisen in the mind of a girl not wholly bad, yet distracted by a lawless love, and with the power in her hands of sweeping her rival from the face of the earth, probably without suspicion or discovery. What so easy? had not she the means in her hand? He represented her as stung and roused by the reproaches which probably the young wife on suddenly awaking might address to her, and, fired by sudden resentment, rushing to "the fatal draught" which was before her. He commented upon her wild flight, her confession, the remorse which had evidently seized her, the terror, which it was evident her friends had shared. He pointed out the strange and lurid light which the destruction of the phial, an incident unknown to the prosecution before yesterday, threw upon the whole question. When he ended the assembly had all decided against Innocent in their hearts; the jurymen, pale and almost stupefied by the thought, looked at her, wondering how they could find a Lady Longueville, a beautiful young woman, guilty, and trying to steel their hearts to that terrible duty. Half the

women in the place (and there were a great many) were weeping. Good heavens! was it proved, then? was she guilty, that child? The hopes of her friends fell. Nelly sank back in her seat, covering her white face with her trembling hands. Sir Alexis continued to stand up with his arms folded on his breast, and a face like yellow marble, or old ivory, so ghastly did it look, every sign of youth gone out of it, steeling himself to bear whatever was to come.

The evidence for the defence seemed at the first glance very insignificant. It was chiefly directed to one point. The first witnesses called were two railway officials, who proved that the up-train passed through Sterborne at 12.45 every night, that it was seldom more than ten minutes late, being an express train to town with few stoppages, and that on the night of the 20th October it had left Sterborne station at 12.50 exactly. The only other witness of any importance produced was a London physician of eminence, who proved that no opiate, even though administered in a very large quantity, could by any possibility produce death within the time indicated by the evidence. The sleep which preceded death would no doubt have set in (he said), but that was very distinct and easy to be distinguished from any fit of fainting or temporary unconsciousness. "The merest tyro in medicine must know as much as this," he added, with a contempt of the country practitioner who had maintained an opposite opinion. This was absolutely the whole of the case for the defence. The speech of Mr. Serjeant Ryder was equally brief and pithy. He pointed out the vagueness of the evidence as to hour, and the fact that by the longest computation two hours was all the time allowed for such a sequence of events as the prosecution attempted to set forth; for the conception and carrying out of a murder by poison, the death of the deceased, the flight of the prisoner, all the developments of this tragic drama. Never drama on the stage went more quickly, he cried; and he showed how innocent fright and panic might have quite naturally produced every sign which was put forth as a sign of guilt. What more natural than that, seeing her charge die before her eyes, her simple and somewhat feeble (as the court had perceived) and undeveloped intelligence should jump at the idea that she had herself been partially instrumental in the terrible event she had witnessed? He pointed out that the only inference which could be drawn from the testimony of those witnesses who had been present on the occasion was that the death of the deceased had been instantaneous, whereas Dr. Frankfort had proved to them beyond dispute that no death by opium could be instantaneous, that the poison required a certain time to do its work, a time which was not afforded by the short interval between eleven o'clock, which the witness Johnson had heard striking while the voice of the deceased was still loud and angry, and 12.40, when the unfortunate prisoner left Sterborne by the train. These dates, he added,

placed the case beyond the category of possibilities. And with this brief and unsensational address he sat down.

All this—the case for the defence altogether—did not occupy an hour. The audience held their breath. They stared at each other like people fallen from some sudden height. Was it possible that they had been spending their interest and tears all for nothing?—for an untenable case, a thing which had been from the commencement impossible, had they taken the trouble to examine. The jurymen's faces lighted up. After all, it might not be necessary to convict the young creature who was called "my lady." They would have recommended her to mercy, no doubt, and done everything they could to cancel their decision had they been compelled to make one in an adverse sense. But now their relieved feelings showed in their countenances, which brightened to the new possibilities unfolded before them. One or two only remained cloudy. The rest prepared with a cheerful confidence, seeing themselves almost out of the wood, and as eager to be relieved as Innocent, to hear the judge's summing up. Mr. Justice Molyneux was very great in this grand point of a judge's duty. It was one of "the greatest intellectual treats" to hear him. But perhaps he was not quite himself that day. He commented upon the evidence in a style which was not marked by his usual force and freedom. He said something civil about Mrs. Eastwood. He noticed slightly the touching, though altogether irregular, address of the prisoner. He pointed out to the jury that, though circumstances had at one time seemed overwhelmingly against her, and though her own evident impression that she was guilty, her precipitate flight, her repeated confession, seemed in one point of view to establish her guilt, there was a more charitable interpretation to be put on all these strange proceedings. It was possible, as the prisoner's counsel had suggested, that simple fright and terror might be at the bottom of them, instead of guilt. Other cases had occurred in which an innocent person had accused himself of terrible crimes such as he had never committed. The jury was called upon to weigh all these contending arguments with the most serious care, and judge whether the panic of guilt or the panic of mere fright was at work upon the mind of the prisoner. He need not tell them that where there was a doubt she was entitled to the benefit of that doubt. The conduct and avowals of the prisoner herself made the chief foundation the prosecution had to build upon, and the destruction of the phial by the prisoner's family was no doubt very strongly against her. The judge then called their attention to the only, but most important, point on which the defence was founded. It was backed by an authority which, to many people, would seem infallible; but yet there were minds to which no one is infallible, and it was proverbial that doctors differed on the most important subjects. If they believed that Dr. Frankfort was right, and that

poisoning by opium was impossible in so short a time, then their only course would be to acquit the prisoner; but if, on the other hand, they proposed to take the opinion of a younger disciple of Esculapius, then the case remained as the very able and striking speech of the counsel for the prosecution left it. Fortunately, the whole matter lay in a nutshell. If they accepted the confessions o the prisoner, which some minds might be inclined to do—for there could be no doubt that an unsolicited confession of guilt was a very grave matter, and could not be disregarded—and considered the after circumstances as confirmatory of her guilt, they would find her guilty, though he did not think that even in that case there was any evidence to prove premeditation, and the offence must bear a less solemn appellation than that of murder; but if, on the other hand, they believed the distinct affirmation of the great physician whose evidence (delivered, he need not say, in the clearest and most satisfactory manner) they had just heard, they would understand that, notwithstanding her own impression of guilt, and whatever might be the intention with which the potion was administered, it was physically impossible that the prisoner could have committed the crime laid to her charge.

There was a pause when the judge finished, then an attempt at applause, suppressed by the officials, who, after their failure on the previous day to silence Innocent, were doubly on the alert. Then the crowd grew suddenly still, and every man looked at his neighbour. The excitement grew intense. The next sound everybody felt must be the words of the verdict, the "Guilty" or "Not Guilty," which should be life or death. I will not attempt to describe the feelings of those principally concerned. I think they had come to that point when feeling becomes impossible, the mind having gone through all its stages. They waited, not daring to look up, not daring to think. The two least concerned were the accused and her counsel. She because that gleam of sky through the window had caught her wandering soul; he because he felt sure of his verdict. And thus they waited in the silence, in the awful suspense which subdues a great, rustling, restless crowd into unnatural, many-breathing stillness, waiting for the issues of life and death.

What visions went and came in that moment! Nelly with her feverish eyes saw—or was it a dream?—Ernest's face look out from the depths of the crowd and then vanish. Sir Alexis saw, not a scaffold—that was impossible—but a gloomy array of prisons, rising one beyond another, as the suspense continued. Death in life—would not that be worse than death itself?

CHAPTER XLIX.

DELIVERED.

THE jury were not agreed. Though the case lay in a nutshell, the nut was for the moment too hard for them. One or two indignant Battyites held the field against the gentler souls who had been so overjoyed to seize upon the possibility of a favourable verdict. If she had been a poor girl, who would have inquired whether or not there was time for the poison to take effect, and what had that to do with the question? asked the recalcitrants. Murder was meant—could any one doubt it, when the murderess herself confessed it? What had justice and Englishmen come to if they let a criminal off because she was "my lady"? Thus two revolutionaries dissolved the court, kept in tortures of suspense the unhappy persons most concerned, and filled the town once more with the buzzing and commotion of a curious crowd. The unhappy twelve were shut up again, far from their homes and comfort; the judge wended his way with dissatisfied countenance to his dinner, at which he spoke in terms not flattering of the British juryman; and a group of very miserable people assembled in the lodging opposite to the prison. They were doubly miserable, because none of them were allowed to see the unfortunate girl whom they knew to be there alone, unsupported by any sympathy, bearing the burden of suspense without any alleviation. They gathered round the table, making a miserable pretence at a meal, from which Sir Alexis, however, escaped ere it was half over, in the restlessness of misery to wander under the window where his poor little bride, the unfortunate young creature with whose name his name and fame were inextricably connected, lay alone, beyond the reach of any gentle voice, while poor Nelly withdrew weeping to conceal the additional pangs of her own unthought-of pain. Was it Ernest whose face she had seen? Was he coming back again to rend or to console her heart? Was he waiting the result to decide the question for him? She hated herself for being able to think of this personal question; yet how was it possible to shut it out?

Mr. Justice Molyneux had his own troubles on that painful day. He disliked having anything to do with cases in which what he called "private feeling" must be more or less involved. He was angry with the Eastwoods for being connected prospectively with himself, and with Innocent for being connected with the Eastwoods. He was angry with his son for keeping on that lingering, absurd engagement which ought to have come to a conclusion one way or another a year ago. He hoped now that Ernest would see his folly; and yet privately within himself the man who—whatever he was besides—was a man and no weakling, despised his son for not

standing by the girl whom he professed to love. He had seen this girl, whom he himself had, so to speak, received into his family, to whom he had given a fatherly kiss as Ernest's future wife, by herself, with the high though passive courage of a woman, standing by her cousin in her trouble; and though he was glad on the whole that his son "kept himself out of it," yet in the depths of his soul he was ashamed that a son of his should have so poorly played the man. Had Ernest been there, dancing attendance on the family in trouble, his father would have denounced him as an incurable fool; but he would have respected him, notwithstanding his folly. Now, he was glad that things had turned out as they had done; but he despised Ernest, and blushed—so far as a judge and man of the world *can* blush—at the thought that he himself had been instrumental in bringing such a poor creature into the world. He was wroth, too, to have this wretched business prolonged for another day—to have those Eastwoods constantly before his eyes, and that solitary Nelly with her white face. They were as much in his way as ever Haman was to Mordecai. He hated to see them—he felt ashamed before them—he wished the business well over for the poor little idiot at the bar, who was as mad as a March hare no doubt, but pretty, poor thing! Mad for Frederick Eastwood? Heaven above, what idiots women are!

These reflections, however, did not interfere with his dinner, of which the excellent judge had great need—for hard work in which there is a mixture of emotion (as much emotion again as a judge can be expected to feel) is very exhausting, and whets a naturally excellent appetite. He had fortunately come to the end of the more substantial part of his repast, when a sudden message was brought to him. The jury had made up their minds! What was to be done? Were they to be held in vile durance for a whole night after this desirable result had been obtained? Was the accused to be kept in the agonies of suspense for the same period? And finally—which was, perhaps, the most important of all—was business to be delayed next morning by the re-introduction of this case, which had already taken up the court during two days? The judge made up his mind, though not without some internal groanings. He called his retinue about him; sent hasty warnings to the counsel for the different sides, and to all the principal parties involved; and, donning his robes, took his way once more to the Town Hall, causing great commotion among the groups in the streets. Lights were hastily lighted, doors hastily thrown open, and the agitated street emptied itself at once in a throng—gentle and simple together—the ragamuffin and the righteous member of society for once in their lives side by side—into the dim and dingy Town Hall, with its huge, staring portraits of mayors and lord-lieutenants, faintly lighted up by the flaring gas, and its dust-coloured walls looking more dingy than ever in the unwonted light.

Innocent was seated on her poor bed, dull and passive and alone. She had ceased to think of the sky through the window and the world out of doors, and the hope of going home. To be without imagination is sometimes an advantage, but very often it is a great misfortune. Poor Innocent, being almost destitute of this quality, had not strength of vitality to remind herself that to-morrow was on its way, and might bring her deliverance. The dimness and the terrible solitude fell upon her like things eternal. She could not rouse herself to feel that this dreary night, which was again closing over her, would ever end. The darkness had fallen upon her mind like lead, weighing her down to the very ground. It seemed something from which she could never more get free, from which escape was impossible. She was not thinking. She was past the possibility of thought. She sat listless, in a dull trance of pain, incapable of motion or of feeling. When the key grated in the lock, when the door was suddenly thrown open, and figures dark against the light which streamed behind them rushed in with haste and excitement to call her, she rose, dazed and stupefied, because they told her to do so, tied on her little bonnet because they bade her, and followed for the same reason, with her faculties so dull and dead that nothing which could have happened would have roused, much less surprised her. She held mechanically by the woman who had attended during those two weary days, but she did not ask, not even of herself in her thoughts, where they were taking her, or what was the cause of this sudden interruption of the dismal stillness. The reign of phantasmagoria had come back again; the strange dingy court with its lights, the strange sea of faces, all whirled about the girl—something which had no connexion with her, no meaning, an inarticulate dream. She gazed straight before her with her scared eyes which saw nothing. She held fast to the woman, the only point of reality which felt steady in this whirl of sight and sound. What it meant was all dark to Innocent. A vague sense that something was about to be done to her crept gradually upon her bewildered faculties. Somehow, she could not tell how, the scene seemed to mingle with that old scene in the Methodist chapel, so that she could not tell whether some sudden chance had transported her there again, and whether these moving figures which seemed about to approach her were those of the men whom she had supposed to threaten her life. She turned wildly to look if there was any way of escape. Alas! this time poor Innocent could not flee. She was surrounded, shut in, secured on all sides. It seemed to her that she heard her own name out of the midst of that terrible, spectral crowd. Ah, what was coming? what was coming? With a cry which rang through the whole building, which reached the crowd outside, which echoed for days through the ears of every one who heard it, she shrank back into the corner where she stood, back, cowering and hiding her face with her hands.

What happened next? I do not think that Innocent ever knew. She was the centre of a confusion and tumult, from which after a while there slowly merged the face of Sir Alexis close to hers, quivering with emotion and joy. Then his voice, saying, "It is all over, my darling, we are going home——" then strange low cries and sounds of weeping—sounds in which Innocent benumbed had no power to join; then a breath of air, wild, sweet fresh air of the spring night, suddenly blowing upon her face as if it had never been caught and confined within four walls; and then she knew nothing more.

"The girl has gone mad," said Mr. Justice Molyneux, as he threw off his robes, "and I have a dozen minds to commit the jurymen for wilful murder—well—or contempt of court if you will—it comes to much the same thing."

She was acquitted—that was the end—whether or not too late to save her tottering reason no one knew. Even Batty himself and his warmest partisans had been struck dumb by that cry. "She's got off; but the Lord hasn't let her off," cried some one of those virulent censors who are so ready to undertake that God must agree with them; but the crowd cried "Shame" upon the vindictive suggestion. They kept back the malcontents with instinctive sympathy while poor Innocent was half led, half carried out by a side door towards the rooms where Mrs. Eastwood, happily unconscious of the crisis, was trying to sleep after nights of sleepless anxiety. As Innocent was thus led away some one else rushed to the door of the Town Hall, meeting the crowd as it poured forth, meeting the lawyers who stood about in groups, discussing the matter. "I have brought the doctor!" he shouted vaguely at the wigged figure of Mr. Ryder, the only one distinguishable in the uncertain light. John Vane caught at the young man's arm in the crowd. "It is all over," he said, "thank God! She is safe, and it is all over." Jenny Eastwood fell back upon the doctor, whom he had hunted after so long, whom he had brought so far, and who was now surrounded by a crowd of eager friends, shaking hands with him. If he had been but a year or two younger I think the boy would have cried in the bitterness of his disappointment. All this for nothing! and Innocent saved without him, when he was away, without any need of his services! Though he gulped his trouble down in a moment, and faced John Vane, who was looking at him kindly, with a countenance instantaneously subdued out of the quiver of pain that had passed over it, Jenny had as sharp a pang to bear in that moment as might have supplied discomfort enough for a year. "Never mind. It was best to do it anyhow," he said, feeling the sting go through and through him, and scarcely conscious of anything else.

"Quite right," said Vane; "though like most great efforts it is not to have any reward. Come home with me, Jenny. They

are all here. I don't think we could have lived out another night."

"Who are 'we'?" said Jenny cautiously.

"All of us," said Vane, with the water in his eyes. He could have cried too, for other motives than those of Jenny. He had not thought of himself—he had not even in his generosity thought of Nelly until that moment. But he had been with her constantly during the few days which appeared to them all like so many years. He had stood by her when there was no one else to stand by her, when even her mother, as a witness, was not allowed to be with her child. He had been Nelly's brother, her support, her companion; he and not the other; and was the other to come in now, when all was over, to take the reward which he had not earned, to share the ease when he had not shared the trouble? A poignant sense of injustice began immediately to combat in Vane's mind with a great many other feelings. Is there any simple, unmingled feeling, any primitive unity of thought, possible to men in these days? something of the sort had been forced upon all this group during Innocent's danger; they had been conscious of but one thought and one purpose, that of saving her. But now that she was saved, do you suppose that simple joy was enough to fill up these complex souls? They were all off in a moment, each into his separate labyrinth, conscious of the relief, but chiefly because that relief allowed the presence of other evils to be felt. Jenny, poor boy, had a very tangible cause for his disappointment. He had laboured in vain, and spent his strength for nought, and the others who had not done half so much as he had got the reward. Thus his feelings were somewhat analogous to those which had burst into sudden life in the mind of Vane. Both of them mastered their feelings, and began to talk of the trial, and how it had come to this happy issue. But the man and the boy felt very much alike in the sudden shock and revulsion. They had laboured and suffered, and others had the reward.

Dear reader, I will not insist upon carrying you into all the strange excitement which filled those little lodgings. Innocent, when she was taken into the unknown room, seemed to have suddenly frozen again into the Innocent who had arrived two years before at The Elms. She suffered Nelly to hang about her, to place her in a chair, to bring her a footstool, to take off her bonnet with the same passive stare which had bewildered them all in the old days. I believe if Frederick had come in at that moment she would have turned to him as she had then, falling back upon her first friend. But Frederick, fortunately, was not there. The mob, not willing altogether to lose a victim, and urged on by certain hot partisans of Batty, had detected him on his way to his mother's lodgings, and had so hooted and mobbed and jeered him, that he had taken refuge in high disgust and profound humiliation in the railway station. Frederick, as I have often said, held reputation

high, though he did a great deal in secret to forfeit it; and this vulgar assault and the supreme horror of hearing himself called names—himself, Frederick Eastwood, the most important figure in the world to his own thinking—so worked upon him, coupled with the sense that a few ruffians even lingered without to renew the operation as soon as he re-appeared, that he took the next train for London, telegraphing from thence to Sir Alexis his joy and congratulations. He had not cut a very exalted figure altogether at the trial of his cousin for the murder of his wife. The Sealing Wax Office is too important a branch of the economy of the State not to have departments in the larger colonies, and branches all over the world. Frederick accepted a colonial appointment the very next day. It was the only thing to be done in his circumstances; and, except his mother, I doubt if any one much regretted his departure; but mothers have a way of thinking well of their children—a prejudice which, perhaps, if not very wise, is still good for the world.

Innocent was roused a little out of her stupor when she was taken up-stairs to the room where Mrs. Eastwood lay, trying to rest, because she had promised to do so, and wondering what the sounds might be down-stairs, the sounds of as many feet passing outside, which honour and her promise forbade her from noticing. She gave a great cry, and sprang from her sofa to catch Innocent in her arms, when she was led in by Nelly in order that her mother's eyes when she woke should open upon the saved one.

"As if I could sleep with one of you in danger!" Mrs. Eastwood cried, weeping. Innocent did not leave her all night, and gradually by slow degrees the warmth came back to her heart, as warmth and life come back to the limbs of a creature frozen and benumbed by drowning, or by exposure to the cold. When she slept, which was not for a long time, her smile came back to her in dreams, and then a faint shadow of colour to her white cheek; and when she woke, she woke herself again—the Innocent of Longueville, the budding, half-expanded soul who had begun to reward the toils of all those who had tended her. With wonder and joy they watched her—not mad, not vacant, not stupefied—recovering as a flower does that has been trodden upon, but from which no passing misfortune can take its elasticity. While they wondered and speculated whether it was safe to say anything to her of the proceedings of the past days, she went of herself to the window, and looked across at the dreary old prison walls. They saw her gazing at this dreary building, and waited, no one daring to speak. At last she turned to them with a soft smile.

"Which was my window?" she said.

They all came hurrying round to prove to her how safe she was, how entirely delivered from the gloomy durance of yesterday, and pointed it out to her with smiles and tears.

"That one!" said Innocent, still smiling. "I wish I had known it was so near. What a little way! and you sat here and watched me? It was almost the same as being at home."

Why did they all kiss her, with those tears? She accepted the kisses and dried the tears with her handkerchief, with a half-laughing gesture like a child's.

"Yes, *almost* the same," she repeated, lingering upon the word with a strange, smiling pathos, which gave to it a double suggestiveness. She stood long at the window thus smiling, saying nothing more—as the soul may smile which has newly arrived in heaven—in a trance of celestial wonder to find out after all how little way it is from the prison window to the light of the everlasting home.

And after this she became perfectly tranquil, and prepared for her journey home, and did what she was told, with no apparent consciousness that anything very extraordinary had happened to her. Sir Alexis, much more shaken, looking old, as though ten years had passed over his head, was eager to take advantage of this calm, and carry her back to Longueville without delay.

"She must be ill—this cannot last. After all that she has gone through her health must give way sooner or later," he said. But he was much more likely to be ill himself than was Innocent. She, in the simple unity of her feelings, had not felt half nor a third part so much as he had felt—as he felt still. For all the complications of sentiment, the horror of publicity, the man's humiliation at having his domestic privacy intruded upon, at having his marriage discussed, his wife's name bandied about from one vulgar mouth to another, every circumstance of his life laid bare, had no existence for Innocent. She had felt the actual horrors of loneliness, vague alarm, sickening personal terror, made stronger by ignorance. But these were all; and when she was alone no longer, when she was freed from her prison, surrounded by her friends, no longer frightened or forsaken, the weight was taken at once from Innocent's head. She thought nothing of the publicity, and was not conscious of the shame.

But Sir Alexis was conscious of it—very conscious. He felt to his very heart that years would have to elapse before his young bride could be seen anywhere without being pointed out as "the woman who was tried for murder." He knew that in society most people would believe, or at least say, whether they believed it or not, that she had been guilty; and that everybody would make sure that she had loved Frederick Eastwood, a hypothesis very galling to her husband. Thus, though Innocent was saved, he was not saved, nor could be all his life, from the consequences of this prosecution. The newspapers began to comment upon it immediately after its termination, and to characterize it as entirely vindictive—a case which no good barrister should have undertaken,

for which no grand jury ought to have brought in a true bill. "Everybody knows that, under certain physical conditions, there is nothing so common as self-accusation," said the *Thunderer;* "and that murder is the favourite crime selected by the victims of this mania." These discussions were all in Innocent's favour: but oh, how terrible is the favour of the newspapers to a young girl—a young wife of eighteen! Better a hundred times that they should even damn her instantaneously, and let her go!

Thus Sir Alexis hastened back with his bride to Longueville, telling her fondly that everything was over that could harm her, and that they should now begin their old, sweet life once more. But, alas! that sweet life was gone like the winter snow; for the man who was no longer young, who could not hope to live to forget or see it forgotten, that life would return no more.

CHAPTER L.

JENNY'S MEDITATION.

"NELLY, where is Molyneux?" asked her brother abruptly. Jenny had just come back from the railway-station, where he had been seeing Innocent off. He was not in a very light-hearted humour, I can scarcely tell why. The boy was a far-seeing boy,—he might have private reasons of his own which increased his predisposition to see things in an uncomfortable light; but, at all events, Jenny was of opinion that Innocent's chances of happiness were somewhat diminished; and, being uncomfortable himself, he had no particular objection to make other people uncomfortable. Besides, he had perceived, with his quick eyes, that his sister had "something on her mind,"—and he was disposed to help her to deliver herself. Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly were going on a visit to Miss Vane at the High Lodge, and then they were to proceed to Longueville. They were all rather glad to escape from home and their anxious friends, until the great event of Innocent's trial had lost something of its freshness and novelty. Mrs. Eastwood, too, was much shaken in health by all her anxieties and vigils; and to see Nelly's pale face, with dark lines under the eyes, and the shadowy resemblance to Innocent, which grew more apparent as she grew sadder, was more than enough to warrant Jenny in his conclusion that she had something on her mind. She started nervously when he addressed this question to her. She had not so much as named Ernest to any one since they came to Sterrington, and in the excitement of other anxieties, and absorption of all things in Innocent,

she had not been questioned on the subject even by her mother. This was one reason why Nelly was so pale:—she had to reveal to them all the change of affairs. She had to acknowledge to herself formally, in so many words, that it was all over. She had to wind up this chapter of her early life, and agree that it was ended, and communicate the fact to everybody. And Nelly, not feeling herself able to take the initiative, had been burdened and weighed down by the secret, which no one shared, more than I can say.

"Ernest?" she said, with a sudden flush, and then added, more quietly, "at home, I suppose,—for anything I know——"

"Why was he not here with you?" said Jenny, pursuing his inquiries steadily. "There was nothing to detain him, I know; for he did come to see how things were going on——"

"Ah! I was right, then!" said Nelly, "it was his face I saw. —Tell me what was the meaning of it, Jenny dear.—Tell me all you know.—How did you find out he had been here?—and why, why did he come here, without coming to me——?"

"Are you still fond of Molyneux, Nelly?"

"Oh, don't ask me any questions," she cried, with the impatience of suffering, "tell me all you know!"

"Look here," said Jenny; "a great deal that is not nice is said about women. For my part I am inclined to stand up for women. I'm a woman's son, which tells for something,—and a fellow that has been brought up to be your brother, Nelly, likes girls in a way. —But look here, it will go a long way to convince me that you are all people say—silly, pig-headed, unreasonable, and more fond of your own way than of anything else in the world,—if you, Nelly Eastwood, a girl of some sort of character, go and break your heart for that prig Molyneux, when you can have a brick like John Vane for the picking up——"

"Jenny! how dare you speak to me so?"

"Oh, as for daring, I'm not afraid of you," said Jenny calmly, "nor I don't mind what I say.—What, a fellow that leaves you in that court by yourself,—a fellow that knows all about law and that sort of thing, and never offers help or advice,—that's ready to come in and take the good of you when we're all well at home—but can't stand by you for a day when you're in trouble!—By Jove!" cried Jenny, who was not addicted to expletives,—"a whipper-snapper of a fellow at the best, who is no more fit to be put by the side of John Vane than—I am! If you show yourself such a fool, Nelly, there's nothing that was ever said about women so bad but I'll believe it, —I'll give you up for ever, you, and all the rest!——"

Jenny took a turn round the little room at the end of this speech, to work off the vehemence of his feelings. But as for Nelly, all her spirit, all her self-will, all her sense of fun had died out of her. She tried to be angry and could not,—she tried to laugh and could not. Her heart ached with confused and complicated pangs of suffer-

ing. If I was to try to lay bare that mystery of diverse pain, the only readers who would follow me through it would probably be women who understand it without description. Nelly had not lived all this time between these two men without having been forced into the same way of thinking as her brother expressed so forcibly. She too had been compelled to admit to herself, by imperceptible degrees, first with a secret rage against Vane, with indignation at herself, with grief, with sore perception of a hundred minute points of difference which went to her heart, that the man whom she had supposed she loved was not the equal of the other man who loved her. How she had resisted and fought against this conviction! how she had struggled, bringing up before herself Ernest's good qualities, his superior talents (and everybody knows that a man of genius cannot be bound by the same rules as other men), his greater youth, (for of course men become considerate as they grow older), and the influence of his family, which was not of an elevating kind; how by-and-by she had sunk into silence (with herself) on the subject, tacitly allowing Vane's excellence, and falling back upon the main fact that he was not Ernest; until this last chapter of all, when her appeal to Ernest had been made in vain, when he had accepted her farewell, abandoned her side, left her without even a word of consolation during the trial,—when he had wounded her heart and outraged her pride and delicacy, and left no plea possible to be made for him, even by the most subtle advocate. The mere fact that he had been her accepted lover, that the dreams of the future had all woven themselves about him, that he had kissed her virgin lips, and held her virgin hand, was the only link which now bound Nelly, by one of the fantastic, unformulated laws of a girl's code of honour, to Ernest Molyneux. This had been so; and to such a girl as Nelly Eastwood the bond so made was one which it was shame and torture to break, or to think of as having existed when once broken. All girls do not feel in this way; but then all girls are not alike, any more than all men are—which is a doctrine curious and strange, I am aware, to many critics. All these different pangs and griefs were surging through her mind as Jenny cut the knot of her hidden thoughts, and boldly broached the subject which she had not dared so much as to whisper a word of. And yet it had to be spoken about. Ernest had not even written to her; he had accepted the dismissal she had given him in her haste; and the fact must be made known and recognized. She made no answer for some time to Jenny's tirade, but at last she burst forth piteously, in tones which he could not resist,—

"Oh, Jenny, tell me all you know; it is not from any weak wish—what I want is to know—Why did he come? and why did he not come here? What did he say? I will tell you everything there is to tell, if you will first tell me what you know!——"

"Nelly, I hope you are not such a fool as you look," said the boy severely. "I met him at the junction half way, where the train stops. He was going up, I was coming down. He said he had been to see how the trial was going on, that things looked rather bad, that I had better make haste with my doctor, that doctors were no good, for they would swear against each other through thick and thin, and that if we'd had our wits about us, we'd have packed Innocent off to Australia or somewhere, as soon as we knew, and that she'd never get over it nor any of us as long as she lived, if they acquitted her twenty times over. Then he gave me a nod and the train went off. It was a pleasant meeting," said Jenny; "if it hadn't been that I had the doctor to look after, and my head full of poor Innocent, and some thoughts of you, Nelly, if you can care for such a fellow—by Jove, I'd have dragged him out of the carriage window, and pitched him across the rails—it would have served him right."

"Jenny, my dear boy," said Mrs. Eastwood, coming in, "does not poor Innocent's great misfortune show you the folly of such threats? I don't know of whom you were speaking—but I am sure you didn't mean what you say, whoever it was. Don't say such things, dear. You wouldn't hurt any one——"

"Wouldn't I though!" cried Jenny, indignant. "You may trust me, mother, if I had the chance. If ever man deserved a good licking, it's him."

"Oh, Jenny, don't!" said Nelly, in a sharp tone of pain.

The mother looked from one to the other. She did not ask any questions. I suspect the mystery was not so profound to her as poor Nelly had thought it.

"We have had enough of such talk," she said. "Nelly, Miss Vane is to come for us at three o'clock, and Jenny's train is still earlier. I wish we were all out of this place which has brought us nothing but misfortune——"

"I don't call the Vanes misfortunes," said Jenny.

"Ah, the Vanes!" his mother replied, with a relaxation of all the lines in her face; and then she smiled, and said, "Come, Nelly. I hope the humours of the nunnery will blow some of our cobwebs away."

Jenny thought the metaphor very confused as he went out, leaving them to their packing, and, no doubt, to confidences more distinct than Nelly had given to himself. But he was a lad of understanding, and he perceived all that had happened. Yes, the metaphor was very confused—how could humours blow cobwebs away? There was this to be said about women certainly, that the language they used was very often inexact, though it might be forcible enough. For instance, Jenny acknowledged to himself his mother could polish off a fellow very neatly when occasion served—and he had no doubt she would polish off Molyneux in a way that would

leave nothing to be desired. But still the metaphor was confused; he was thinking how to put it when he encountered Vane, who had a restless way of taking walks abroad when there was nothing else to be done. Jenny joined himself to the elder man whom he admired, and went over the town with him, looking at the public buildings with vague curiosity. The Assizes were still going on, and groups standing about the Town Hall, as they had been when poor Innocent stood at the bar; but to Innocent's cousins it seemed that it was years since the trial had ended, though they paused, and looked with a long-drawn breath at the place where other people might be suffering the same anxieties which now had ended for them.

"I wonder," said Jenny, bringing this perennial train of thought suddenly in, to break the lighter tone of their conversation—"I wonder if Molyneux is right—if she'll never get over it as long as she lives."

"If——who——will never get over it?" asked Vane.

"Innocent; that's what he said—I suppose he knows Society, and that sort of thing; though she was acquitted twenty times—that she would never get over it as long as she lived."

"All that comes very well from Molyneux," said Vane, growing red, "who has never done anything, so far as I know, to help either Innocent—or your family, Jenny—to whom he was beholden——"

"Well," said Jenny, with an indifferent air, "it's an ill wind that blows nobody good. I believe poor Innocent's trial has done what nothing else could have done—convinced Nelly at last that this fellow Molyneux——"

"You don't mean it!" cried Vane.

Jenny, who had taken his arm, felt Vane "jump," as he said after, and knew that his chance shot had taken full effect.

"But I do," said Jenny composedly. "I had not time to get it all out of her; but I am quite sure of this much, at least, that all is over between them—and time too. Why, the fellow actually came down here—to see how things were going—and never went near them. Nelly saw him in the court. A girl would be a fool indeed—which Nelly ain't, for I know the sort of girl she is—if she put up with that——"

How John Vane "jumped," to be sure!—what a nervous fellow he was, though big enough for anything, and with that beard! So Jenny thought as he felt his companion's arm thrill, and enjoyed it. I don't think Vane made any immediate response, good or bad. He managed to make Jenny talk, which was more to the purpose, but I don't think he committed himself in words; nor was it until they had gone a long way through the streets, and Jenny had recollected that the time approached for his train, that John Vane's feelings burst forth in speech.

"Jenny, old fellow," he said, "is there anything you want—books, or that? or a little spare tin that you don't care to speak to your mother about? Make me your banker, old boy."

Jenny withdrew his arm from that of his friend. He was quite as tall, and, barring the beard, not much less imposing in muscular magnitude. The boy stood almost on equal terms, as Englishmen love to have them, with his elder companion. He looked Vane seriously, even anxiously, in the face, and addressed him slowly.

"Do you think she'll have you?" he said.

CHAPTER LI.

THE NUNNERY.

THE Eastwoods spent several weeks at the High Lodge. They saw it at its very best, in all the spring blossoming, when the trees put on their most delicate greenery, and all the children, big and little, and all the orphans, and even the young ladies of the Upper School, got "their new things" for Easter. I am not sure that Mrs. Eastwood entered as she intended to do into "the humours" of the establishment. She disapproved of a great many things. She disapproved, for instance, totally of Father Featherstone, who directed the consciences of the community, and walked about indoors in a soutane, out of doors in a very ugly black cloak—an insignificant little individual, of whom Miss Vane and her sisters professed to stand much in awe, a profession in which Mrs. Eastwood did not believe. She herself disliked the odd little nondescript, and still more strongly disapproved of him. "Why should you neglect the clergy of the parish?" she said. "I think your rector might have good reason to be affronted——"

"But my rector is not affronted. He has no time to look after our services," said the lay-abbess.

Mrs. Eastwood, however, was not convinced. She shook her head at Father Featherstone's petticoats. She asked whether it was supposed that there was anything wicked in a man's ordinary dress, and called the poor little priest "it" with a shocking Protestantism which was terrible to Miss Vane. But John Vane, who was there constantly—not as an inmate, for that would have been considered impossible at the High Lodge, but as a visitor—took Mrs. Eastwood's hint with peals of profane laughter. "Ni homme—ni femme—prêtre," he said, when he saw the black-robed father making his way through the sunshiny April gardens, and laughed and coaxed his sister who loved him, as pious sisters often love scoffing brothers, out of all offence. Miss Vane herself

admitted that she could not go against Reginald—no one in the family had ever been able to go against him. "But everybody calls Mr. Vane John——" said Nelly. "My dear, there never was a John in our family," said Sister Lætitia, with momentary tartness; but then she added, softening, "You shall call him John, if you like, Nelly." To such a sudden, insidious attack, what could Nelly answer? She professed not to be aware of the meaning of the things that were said to her. She made a conscientious endeavour not to allow herself to feel that her heart was a great deal lighter than it had been, now that there was no struggle of divided duty; and when Jenny's bold comparison of one man with another came into her mind, she tried to think that it was novel to her, that it was indifferent to her, that she had nothing to do with such a question. And in reality Nelly shrank, as every pure-minded and high-spirited girl naturally does, from the thought of replacing one with another—of giving her hand into the hand of another. The transfer was horrible to her, even though her heart had made it unawares. At the end of a fortnight, indeed, John Vane went abruptly away, leaving time and silence to work for him. He too saw that an immediate transfer was a thing impossible, though his sister was slow to see it. "Why shouldn't they settle it all at once and get done with it?" Miss Vane said; "I never had any time to waste in nonsense. They will be far happier if they make up their minds at once." And perhaps, on the whole, she was right. But what does it matter who is right when fantastic questions of feeling are to be considered?

When John Vane went away Nelly breathed more freely. She had got free from the toils in which her foolish youthful feet had been caught unawares. She ran about the High Lodge as she had been used to do at The Elms, with that tinkle of her pleasant steps like a brook, that flutter of her coming and going like a bird among the branches, which had been peculiar to her in the old days at home. There was perpetual movement of light young steps and gleam of cheerful faces in that well-populated place; but Nelly's kept their special character, and were always recognizable. I do not think, for my own part, that Ernest Molyneux enjoyed his release as Nelly did. I don't believe he enjoyed it at all. And this was strictly poetic justice, as the gentle reader will perceive who remarks how Molyneux worried Nelly and rent her gentle being in twain. He has been very bitter about women ever since, and he it is, I am informed, who has written the most virulent of those articles on the subject which have appeared from time to time in a very able and amiable periodical known to all men. Let us hope that in thus developing his sentiments he found as much ease to his mind as Nelly did when, after her long and feverish struggle to keep loving him and approving of him, to keep faithful to her promise, and steadfast in her duty, she got free from his toils, and turned her back on

love, and healed herself among the spring blossoms and the admiring girls at the High Lodge. How they all admired her! She was not so saintly, not so abstracted as poor Innocent, predoomed (they thought) to the crown of martyrdom. But Nelly could do so many things; she was so clever, she was so pretty; and was it not whispered in the community that she had rejected one lover because he had failed to come up to the full standard of her ideal; and had they not seen how Mr. Vane, whom everybody at the High Lodge regarded as the very type of manly excellence, was at her feet? The girls thought there had never been any one seen so delightful as Nelly. They copied her very tones, her little gestures, her modes of speech; and Nelly healed herself of her long warfare in the midst of the cheerful order of the community, amongst the girls and the flowers.

CHAPTER LII.

WHAT BECAME OF LADY LONGUEVILLE.

SIR ALEXIS took his wife abroad early in the summer. His former intentions of spending the season in town, and producing his beautiful new prize in the world for the envy of all beholders, had been of course abandoned. To take her away, to keep her quiet, to abstract the too well-known Lady Longueville from the observation of all spectators, was his only policy now; and the pang with which Sir Alexis consented to this necessity was all the more severe, that he was too proud to disclose it to any one. Even to Innocent's friends he said nothing of the mortification and disappointment which had replaced all his hopes. When the Eastwoods paid their visit at Longueville he was very kind, very attentive to them, but their visit was paid to a lonely and silent dwelling, which had already, in sentiment at least, abdicated its supremacy. It was, it is true, more the show-house of the county than ever, and visitors came eager to inquire into the habits and looks of the Lady Longueville who had been tried for murder, but its stately calm of sovereignty was over. No guests entered its doors that year. The friends of Sir Alexis sent their cards to evidence their sympathy, but they were in town, or they were going abroad, or they were afraid to intrude upon his privacy at a moment of trouble; so that the great house was solitary as an island in the middle of the sea.

"I don't think we shall attempt any society this year," Sir Alexis said to Mrs. Eastwood, with a constrained smile. He was a gentleman, and he showed no signs either to Innocent or her

friends of the heavy burden which he felt he had to bear. At least, he concealed it from Innocent herself, and to some extent from Nelly; but Mrs. Eastwood read the proud man's mortification in every look and word. And he had no deep and true love to fall back upon, only a faltering kindness and fondness for the poor little girl who was no longer the crown of the connoisseur's collection, more delicate than his Dresden, more lovely than his best picture, a living Leonardo, as he had hoped the whole world would acknowledge her to be. Instead of remaining in that heaven of passive art-perfection, Innocent had stepped unawares into the living world, and had become the object of vulgar stares and curiosity, the heroine of a *cause célèbre*. Poor Sir Alexis! he bore it with stoical fortitude, but still the fact that he had much to bear became visible to instructed eyes. He became—not cross, it is too harsh a word—rather consciously forbearing and forgiving to his poor little wife. He made the best of her, but he was worried secretly by the simplicities which a little while before had been her crowning charm. He had to accept her as a woman instead of glorying in her as the highest triumph of art; and when he took her down from the pedestal he had himself erected, poor Innocent was not qualified to enact the part of woman as he understood it. She was a child, little more, perfect so long as you looked at her with the eyes of a connoisseur, but not perfect when the eyes that were turned upon her were those of a husband, very proud, and unwilling to fall below the mark which became a Lady Longueville. Alas, Innocent had not been trained to be Lady Longueville, the mistress of a great house, the companion of a man of the world. She was only Innocent—no more.

He took her abroad; he took her to Pisa, where, poor child, her recollections were sadly confused and uncertain, and where even Niccolo—whom Sir Alexis, true to all that honour and kindness demanded of him, did not fail to seek out, appeared to her through a mist, not the same Niccolo she had known, though his features were unaltered, and his delight at seeing her genuine. But Innocent had not lived at all consciously in those old days, and it struck her with strange wonder to find how little reality there was in her recollections of them, and how, in the midst of them, her heart would return to home. Home meant The Elms, however, to Innocent, not Longueville, nor her husband's pretty house in town, with all its treasures. But she went to Santa Maria della Spina, and said her prayers, though even that visit was paid with little comfort, for her husband was with her, not unindulgent of her prayers, but a little disquieted and annoyed by her long pause after them. Why should she sit there doing nothing? he wanted to know; especially as the little church was soon filled by a party of English travellers, to whom he felt some one was pointing out "the celebrated Lady Longueville—she whose case was in all

the papers, you know." Sir Alexis could never get rid of this fear. Whenever any one looked at his wife (and whosoever has travelled in Italy knows the simple and honest admiration with which all Italians, meaning no harm, regard beauty), Sir Alexis felt that they were staring at the woman who had been tried, the heroine of the murder case which had made so much noise in the papers. When any one in his hotel took up the travellers' book, he shuddered with the consciousness that Lady Longueville's name would be the first to be noticed. Thus he fretted himself day by day. I do not suppose that Innocent had the least idea of this in its full meaning and import, but she felt instinctively the change of atmosphere round her, the absence of that genial warmth to which her half-conscious soul had responded during the first days of their marriage, and the coming in of something new, irritating and painful. The sensation was very strange to her. It was the first time she had ever been in an atmosphere of criticism—the first time she had ever felt the effect of that constant, involuntary watch upon herself and her actions with which a husband, no longer admiring, and not much in love, so often regards his wife. She began to wake up, poor child, to the necessity of considering her own words and ways, of thinking what she should do and what she should say to please him. Even this was not for a long time a conscious process in her mind, any more than Sir Alexis was conscious that his fretted and troubled mental condition betrayed itself sufficiently plainly to command her comprehension. Neither was quite aware of what was going on between them, but yet life was changing to both, new influences coming into being, old things passing away.

The Longuevilles were gone for more than a year—they returned to England only towards the close of the London season, Sir Alexis being still anxious to avoid society, and afraid of the consequences of taking his young wife anywhere. They saw few people, except Mrs. Barclay, who did her best to be as kind and effusive as ever, but who was disappointed bitterly by all the consequences of her brother's marriage with which she had been so much enchanted. There was now, however, an expectation which made up for a great many drawbacks to this good woman, and one about which she made herself very important and very busy. "After all, the old Longuevilles are not to die out," she said to all his friends; and in the flutter of that delightful hope she forgot the disadvantages which Innocent's misfortune had brought about—the banishment of her brother, and the fading of those glories which he had worn for so short a time. "It is almost forgotten by this time; take my word for it, that if next season is at all a good one, and if anything out of the way turns up, nobody will remember that such a thing ever happened," she said, by way of consolation to her brother, who was not in very good health, and who was in more fretful spirits than she had ever seen him. "A change of Ministry, or a Japanese

Embassy, or even another scandal in high life, would make it all right for Innocent even now. There are people, you know, who would make her a lion directly."

"A pleasant thing for a man to have his wife made a lion, and for such a cause," said Sir Alexis, with a growl, which was half of pain and half of irritation. Poor man! he was suffering from suppressed gout, I believe, as well as many mental maladies, of which the pangs are still more severe.

"Well, Alexis—but it is not so bad as it might have been," said Mrs. Barclay; "and before next season you will find it entirely forgotten, and Lady Twyford will present Innocent, and what with the heir we hope for, and all——"

Sir Alexis was mollified; but still he uttered another groan, not loud, but deep. He had lost his beautiful manners; he was not the serene man of the world, the urbane art collector and connoisseur, who had been pronounced delightful on all sides. To be sure, his friends remarked, marriage of itself often produces something of this effect; a man no longer feels it necessary to please everybody when he has secured some one to please him, and this rule tells more surely with your old bachelor than with a young man. But yet there was more than this in the churlishness and irritability which often veiled his once benign countenance. Irritability and churlishness are hard words—too hard, perhaps, to apply to a man who consciously restrained himself, and was at all times a great deal sweeter and gentler than he might have been had he indulged his temper as he often wished to do. But he was ill in health, never having surmounted the excitement, horror, and anxiety of the trial, and he was not young enough to possess the elasticity which can throw off the effects of such a blow. And Innocent, who ought by all rules to have felt it most, had thrown it off entirely; she had never even been ill, which seemed to her husband (though he never said so) the most extraordinary proof of her want of feeling; it had scarcely affected her one way or another, though she was in reality the cause of it all, and ought to have been the chief sufferer; but it had nearly killed him. This gave him a second grievance, and subject of unexpressed complaint against his wife; but yet, with all this sense of injury, and with all his consciousness that Innocent, as a woman and a wife, and the mistress of his house, was a failure, he was very good to her. He changed nothing in his mode of treating her. Nothing was changed save the atmosphere; but then the atmosphere was precisely the one thing which moved Innocent, and in which she was capable of feeling the change.

And various strange thoughts had been working in her also during this year. She had learned to express herself in a different way, and she had learned—what Innocent had never done before—to restrain and conceal herself in some degree. Words would sometimes rise to her lips which she did not utter—a curious symptom

of mental advance—and she learned unawares to step out of herself and shape her mind to her husband. She did more for him a great deal than at first. She read to him, whereas he had been used to read to her. "The Miller's Daughter" had long slid back into the past, but she read the newspapers to him, and books about art, and tried hard to understand, and show at least a semblance of interest. She was fond of pictures by nature, though to read about them was very puzzling, but even the newspapers Innocent attempted, and there were long tracts of reading which she got over with her lips, though her mind escaped from them, and refused to have anything to do with those arid pastures. All this she strained at to please her husband—by the action of the profound, unexpressed, inarticulate conviction in her mind that she had ceased to please him. She was a very good nurse, at least, never weary, finding it possible to be quite still without occupation, without movement, when her patient required rest—ready to read to him as long as he pleased—to do whatever he pleased with a docility unbounded. Shortly after their return to England Sir Alexis had occasion to put this quality to the fullest test. He was taken ill with a complication of disorders, and for a fortnight was in bed, nursed night and day by his wife, who would not leave him, though her own condition required a great deal more care than she gave it. Innocent, however, was impervious to all representations of this kind. "Me! I am well. I am quite well; I never was ill in my life," she said, smiling upon the anxious matrons, her aunt, and Mrs. Barclay, who regarded her proceedings with dismay. Even the hopes which excited the Longuevilles so much did not excite Innocent. Her passive mind did not awake to the future—her imagination was not yet active enough to fix even upon the kind of hope which moves women most. The present was all she knew, and in that she lived and had her entire being.

Sir Alexis began to get well, and he was grateful, so far as he was able, for the devotion she had shown him. But yet his gratitude was tinctured by blame.

"It is very kind of you to nurse me; but when you think of the circumstances, Innocent, it would be still kinder not to wear out and tire yourself," he said, in the half-weary tone of a man bound to give thanks, yet more willing to find fault. Very gentle was his fault-finding—but still it was fault-finding. He allowed her to sit by him all day as he recovered, but with a servant in the next room to do what he wanted, lest she should be fatigued. Even this consideration for her had a certain tacit reproof in it—a reproof too subtle to wake Innocent's intellect, but which yet she felt eagerly as an evidence that she had not quite succeeded in pleasing him. He was not angry—he did not scold her; but yet he did not accept her service with that frank and perfect satisfaction which makes service happy. One of these days, however, Sir Alexis's man, an old

servant who had been long with him, got tired in his turn, and was replaced in the ante-room by another not so agreeable to the master. Innocent took her old offices upon her with a furtive delight when she perceived this. She began again to administer her husband's medicine, to give him his drinks and tonics. In the afternoon the patient became a little cross and restless. Something disturbed his calm, I cannot tell what—some crease in his pillow, some twist of the coverlet, or something, perhaps, in the news of the day which Innocent had been reading. His mind took that evil turn which makes a man ready to be irritated by every trifle, to think of everything that is uncomfortable, and to say many things which are not pleasant to hear. All of us, I suppose, take this ill turn sometimes in the afternoon when the tide of being runs low, and every trifling contradiction becomes a wrong and injury to us. Sir Alexis tried to restrain himself, but he had not entirely succeeded. He even called for his attendant, and consciously vented his ill-temper on the man, that he might not be tempted further; but he had not quite exhausted the vein. Some time after this outbreak Innocent rose softly and went to the table.

"Why cannot you keep still, Innocent?" he said fretfully, "when you know that you ought not to be constantly in motion! What is it now? You disturb more than I can say——"

"It is the hour for your tonic," she said. She was standing with her face towards him, smiling at him, with the smile he had once thought so strangely beautiful—with a Venice glass in one hand, milky white, and of a graceful shape, the very cup for such a hand to hold. With the other she took a bottle from the table, still looking at him. "You are no wiser than me in this," she said; "because it is bitter, you would rather forget it; but you must not forget——"

He lay and looked at her strangely. She was to him at that moment as a picture—a picture he had seen somewhere and half-forgotten. He paid little attention as she approached him with the glass, but kept following out the thread of thought this idea suggested. God knows—or rather the devil knows, which is more appropriate—what evil spirit put it into his head. He looked at her fixedly as she came up to the bedside. He made no movement to take the glass when she held it out to him.

"Habit goes a long way," he said, more to himself than her. "Put it down, Innocent; I don't want my medicine from you; habit goes a long way—*I wonder—will she ever do it again!*"

He looked from her to the glass as he said this, and waved it away from him. I do not know by what magic Innocent understood instantly and distinctly what he meant. He would never have permitted himself to say it, had he not been confident in the slow and dim working of her mind, which generally lost all allusions and understood only plain speaking. But this time, for his

punishment and for his fate, she saw in a moment what he meant. She gave a low cry. She looked at him with such a pathetic look as no human creature had ever turned on him before—like that dumb mystery of reproach which sometimes comes to us from the eyes of a speechless creature, an injured animal, without words in which to form a complaint. Her hand shook, the little milk-white glass fell and crashed in a hundred fragments; and without saying a word Innocent turned away. With the sense of some spell upon him, which kept him speechless, Sir Alexis watched her go softly, quietly out of the room. He called her name before her dress had disappeared from the door, but she did not come back. What had he done? He lay there for some minutes, confounded, scarcely realizing what had happened, as wonder-stricken as though a marble figure had shown signs of feeling. Then he called loudly to the servant in the next room. "Ask Lady Longueville to come back, I want her—instantly!" he said. A strange impatience flushed over him. "Nonsense, nonsense!" he said to himself, "what *can* happen? It is not possible that she understood me—and if she did? Pooh! Is it Innocent I am frightened for?" He laughed, all by himself, lying there in silence. How strange that laugh sounded! not as if it came from him, but from some mocking demon. He looked round, alarmed, to see who it was. "Innocent! Innocent!" he cried aloud, in a terror he could not account for. The servant did not come back. It seemed to him an age while he waited, listening, not hearing a sound in the house. "Innocent!" He sprang out of bed, feeble though he was, and clutched at his dressing-gown, and hurried to the door. There he met the servant coming back.

"Lady Longueville! Where is Lady Longueville?" he said.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Alexis, but my lady has just gone out. I might have caught her at the door had I gone there first, but I went up-stairs to call Mrs. Morton; she's not in her room, Sir Alexis; and John tells me as my lady is gone out."

"Gone out!" cried Sir Alexis in dismay. "Gone out—alone! Where has she gone? Go and ask which way she went. Go and ask if she said anything. Good God! can't you make haste! I mean—Lady Longueville, of course, has gone to take the air. Why didn't you or John, or some one, go with her? a set of idiots! Why on earth is my wife to go out unattended with all of you there?"

"I was here, Sir Alexis," said the man in an injured tone, "and, besides, my lady——"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Longueville in increasing agitation. "Let John go after her at once, as he saw what direction she took, and tell her to come to me directly. I have something to say—Go! go! go! don't lose a moment; and send for my sister," cried Sir Alexis, distracted. His head was throbbing, his limbs failing under him. He could send only his servants after his wife, he could not go

himself to bring her back; he had to fling himself down on his bed exhausted, cursing himself and his fate. What had he done? What had he said? What horrible temptation had beguiled him? He said to himself that it could be but for a moment, that she must come back—that his sweet, simple Innocent would soon and surely forgive the evil words he never meant; but God help him! as he fell back on the weary bed from which he could not rise, what a miserable sinking, what a sense of some dreadful unknown calamity was in his heart!

Innocent went out of her husband's house, poor child, she knew not how,—with that strange, helpless repetition of what she had done before, which seems to be natural to the undeveloped mind when stung with sudden pain. It was the only resource she had. What he had said to her was not an offence to her,—to use such simple words; it was as if he had cut her down suddenly, without mercy or warning,—cut her to the very heart. It did not seem possible to her that she could live and go on after it; it brought back to her all the misery of the past,—all her own conviction of guilt,—all the bewildered, wretched sensation with which she had fled from the house in Sterborne, in which Amanda lay dead. Had she tried to do the same again? Her brain reeled when she attempted to ask herself that question;—certainly that had not happened again what had happened then. The glass had fallen out of her hand and broken. Sir Alexis was living. He had not died. But what had put those terrible words into his mouth? Had she tried to do it again? She wandered forth in her horror and trouble, stricken to the heart,—ill in body,—torn by sufferings she did not understand,—and still more ill in soul, wondering was there not something that she, too, could take, and die? When she fled from Sterborne, her way was clear to go home,—but where could she go now? Not to The Elms, to bring more trouble upon them,—to some hole or cover, anywhere, where she could lie down—only lie down and die.

She wandered about through one narrow lane and another,—she did not know nor care where she went;—and every moment it became more difficult to keep erect—not to fall down and perish altogether. She would have done so, and died probably in a dreary little suburban street, no one knowing who she was, had not old Alice come out of one of the humble houses where dwelt a sewing-woman to whom she had just taken work, as the forlorn creature wandered by. Alice, divining evil with the instinct which never fails a woman who knew so much of life as she had done, rushed to the girl's side, and clutched at her, as blind and sick with pain she tottered by. "Miss Innocent! where are you going?—oh, what ails you, what ails you?" cried Alice.

"Take me somewhere," gasped poor Innocent, clasping her arms with a sudden cry of anguish, round the old friend who came to

her like an angel out of heaven,—"take me somewhere, or I shall die——"

The poor needlewoman stood wondering at her door; and into her poor little room Lady Longueville was taken,—half conscious only of all that was happening to her. What a strange, sudden, miserable nightmare it seemed, after the quiet and peace of the morning!—pain of body, pain of heart, anguish which made her cry aloud, and a sick despair, which quenched and silenced every hope and wish in her. There was no time to ask questions, or to send for those who should have been by her in her suffering. Alice was the only support, the only help she had in heaven and earth. She clung to her, refusing to leave her hold.

"I want no one—no one but Alice," she said, when they spoke to her of her husband and of her friends. And in this poor little house it was that the last hope of the Longuevilles perished and came to nothing—that which had given Innocent new importance in the family, and was to afford her a new beginning, as everybody hoped both in the family and the world.

Meanwhile Sir Alexis' servants went wandering far and near, seeking for her. They went to The Elms first of all, and roused that peaceful house into anxiety and wonder.

"This time my lady has gone clean off her head altogether, as I always expected," the messenger said to the servants of the house, who shook their heads as he drank his beer, and agreed with him that they too had always expected it. I cannot describe the tumult, the vain searching, the runnings to and fro which ensued. It was late at night before any one remarked that Alice had not come home, a discovery which, mysterious as it was, gave a little comfort to the Eastwoods, at least. Nelly and her mother consulted together, and set out immediately on foot to the needlewoman's whom Alice had gone to visit, hoping to hear some news of her, some indications which they could follow out; and there they lighted quite simply, unawares upon Innocent, lying like one dead, speechless, colourless, the ghost of herself, with eyes which never brightened at sight of them, which seemed as if they could make any interchange of kindness ever more with other tender human eyes.

This new catastrophe fell upon them all like lightning from a cloudless sky—like the storm which bursts without warning or sign of evil. Sir Alexis, it is true, who lay at home in a state indescribable, took the blame entirely on himself, and accused himself of cruelty and barbarous folly, such as his attendants would have laughed to hear of, had they not been so much frightened by the condition into which remorse and excitement drove him, calling back his half-departed malady with a hundred cruel aggravations. He moaned over his poor Innocent in all the paroxysms of his disorder in a way that was pitiful to hear.

"Bring her back to me, and I will be better to her than I have

ever been. Bring her back, and all shall be well; if I live—if I live!" he said, with a wail that was sometimes shrill with hope, and sometimes bitter with despair.

This, however, was not to be. Innocent, paler than ever, blank and passive as she had been years ago, was brought back to him as soon as she could be removed, but only in time to see her husband in his last lucid moments, to receive his blessing, and to bid him farewell.

"You have been a good child to me, poor Innocent. God bless you!" said the dying man, putting his hand upon her head; and then he asked feebly and anxiously, "You forgive me for what I said?"

"I did not do it," said Innocent, looking at him very earnestly. "I did not do it." There was no anger in her eyes, only a firm, almost wild denial, which yet she was anxious that he should believe.

"I know you did not," he cried. "Oh, Innocent, my child, kiss me and forgive me! you have been as good as an angel to me. It is I that have been unkind, only I——"

She stooped down over him, her face melting a little, and kissed him—then by a sudden impulse knelt down by his side. Innocent had but one thing that it came into her head to do when she knelt down upon her knees. She said "Our Father" reverently and slowly like a child by her husband's bedside: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that have trespassed against us." I have heard that there was not a dry eye in the room; and when she rose up from her knees she kissed him again, and held his hand till he died.

CHAPTER LIII.

CONCLUSION.

SOME time after this last calamity a large party was assembled, one bright October morning, in the drawing-room at The Elms. The house was full of flowers,—it was full of commotion. Many carriages had cut up the orderly little gravel drive round the shrubbery in front,—the door had been standing open all the morning, there were groups of people everywhere, even in the bedrooms, and the maids, in white ribbons, fluttered about the staircase, and bran-new trunks, with shining leather covers, stood in the hall. The dining-room door stood open, disclosing more flowers; a large, long table, covered with the remains of a feast; chairs thrust aside, and white napkins lying about as they had been left when the party adjourned into the drawing-room, where they had all gathered to-

gether in bright-coloured groups, waiting till the bride should be ready. The bridegroom was already in the hall, looking at his watch, and hearing gibes about the putting on of bonnets, and the putting up of baggage, which was henceforward to be his accompaniment through life;—his kind eyes shone as if they had been ten years younger,—you could scarcely guess that he was getting bald about the temples, so glorified was the man with that wonderful glow of happiness which has a certain pathos in it when it comes a little later than usual. And yet it was not late; he was quite a young man still, even the bridesmaids said,—and his two young brothers-in-law, and his old sister, all clustering about him at this moment in the hall, were ready, at a moment's notice, all three of them, to have gone to the stake for John Vane. It speaks well for a man when he is thus supported on both sides. A great deal of talk was coming from the drawing-room, where the friends of the family, left to themselves, were discussing the matter, as people say our friends always discuss us when our backs are turned. There was nobody to keep this crowd in order. Mrs. Eastwood was upstairs with the bride. The rest of the domestic party were in the hall, as I have said, consoling the bridegroom. Mrs. Everard, who rather took it upon her to do the honours of the place when the head of the house was absent, was herself the ringleader in this talk. Perhaps the gentle reader would like to know what they were saying, before Nelly, in her grey gown,—Nelly sobered out of her white into walking costume,—Nelly with her eyes rather red, and her lip trembling a little,—comes down-stairs.

"I never believed in the other business, for my part," said Mrs. Everard, dropping her voice. "Of course, we must not so much as allude to it now, but you remember as well as I do when Nelly was supposed to be going to do something very different. I never believed in it, not even when we met him here continually, and the poor dear mother, who is too good for this world, let it all go on without taking the most ordinary preventives——"

"But, dear me!" said Mrs. Brotherton, the clergyman's wife, "we heard that every arrangement was made, and that the judge and his family went into it quite as heartily as the Eastwoods did. Indeed, my husband met them here at dinner when the engagement was declared."

"Oh yes, exactly; so did I," said Mrs. Everard, "but there are wheels within wheels. I don't mean to say I approve of that sort of thing, for I've known it to spoil a girl's prospects, and cause a great deal of unhappiness; but, if you don't care about feelings, acquiescing in an engagement is a great deal better than opposing it, and often comes to exactly the same thing."

"I always understood," said Mrs. Brotherton, indignantly, "that the Eastwoods broke it off in consequence of the way in which he behaved when poor Innocent was in trouble."

"Are you talking of young Molyneux?" said her husband, interrupting; "My dear, the less said about that the better. No man likes to remember that his wife was once to have been somebody else's wife——"

"Oh, you always take the man's view of everything," said the parson's wife, "but what I say is that it was Nelly who broke it off, and that she was quite justified, and I wish all girls had as much spirit and sense, to stand up for proper treatment."

"Take my word for it, the Molyneuxes never meant it to come to anything," said Mrs. Everard, "they wouldn't oppose, of course, for the judge is wise, and knew that opposition is the very best way to fix a young man. But I saw through it, from the beginning. I said to them over and over again, 'Why don't you settle about the marriage?'"

"And why didn't they? because he had not the heart to go and work at his profession," cried Mrs. Brotherton; "he was not well enough off to marry, and he never will be, unless the judge dies and leaves him rich, or unless he marries a woman with heaps of money. I am glad Nelly would have nothing to do with him," cried the parson's wife, who stood up for her own side. "What a comfort it is when a girl shows some spirit—there is so little in the world."

"I doubt if Nelly's spirit had so much to do with it as you think," said Mrs. Everard mysteriously. "It was very silly of her mother not to tie him up and settle the business. I always said so from the first. She played into the judge's hand, and let him do as he liked. You may depend upon it, *he* never meant it to come to anything from the very first."

"Then he is a shabby wretch, and worse than I thought even a man could be!" cried the other, with vehemence.

"Oh, trust me, he always knew what he was doing; and the poor dear Eastwoods are sad simpletons," cried Mrs. Everard, shaking her head with a pity which was not, perhaps, quite respectful. And, indeed, I think that this view of the question was generally adopted by society, which likes to think that the woman has had the worst of it in all such cases. Some one advanced however at this moment to ask information about "poor Lady Longueville" in the most hushed and sympathetic tones, putting an end to the previous subject.

"One does not like on such a day as this to say anything which could bring a painful suggestion," said this considerate personage; "but I should like to know what has become of that poor girl."

"She is very well indeed," interposed Mrs. Brotherton. "She is with her cousin, Miss Vane, at that quaint establishment of hers —You never heard of it? It is not a sisterhood, and it is not a school——"

"I disapprove of all such mummery and nonsense," said another

guest, rushing in. "Sisterhoods! what do we want with sisterhoods? Popish rubbish—I'd send them all off to Rome; a pack of silly women——"

"'Silly' is the appropriate adjective to women, I believe," said Mrs. Brotherton, who was advanced in her views; "just as my husband puts 'grey-haired' to the noun 'father,' and 'kind' to the noun 'mother' in his sermons. Innocent, however, is very happy among these silly women—being silly herself, I suppose."

"Very happy? after all that has happened?" said the sympathetic questioner, holding up her hands with wonder and horror.

"Well! after a great misfortune, which was no fault of hers—and which, fortunately, ended in no harm; to be sure she has lost her husband, poor little thing—"

"That was a mistake—another mistake," said Mrs. Everard, shaking her head. "Poor Innocent is as well as can be expected, Lady Dobson. She is very childish, and never will be anything else, I fear. She ought not to have been allowed to marry. As for poor dear Sir Alexis, she could not appreciate him when he was living, and she can't be expected, I suppose, to feel his death very much. It was a mistake altogether. Of course, nobody could expect Mrs. Eastwood to do anything but jump at such a marriage for her neice. But it was injudicious—and, for my part, I always knew she was making a mistake."

"What a sad story altogether! and to end in a convent—how romantic!"

"Convent, indeed! I did not know they went so far as to use that word in Protestant England! What are we coming to, good heavens!"

"But the Eastwoods were always an obstinate race—no getting them to take advice—whenever they make up their minds to anything, wild horses would not move them. What, Nelly coming down-stairs! Then let us see the last of her, ladies," said Mrs. Everard, remembering that it was her place to do the honours as the most intimate friend of the house.

Nelly stood on the threshold in her grey gown; her mother held her by one hand, her husband by the other. She looked back upon a cloud of faces, all smiling, throwing good-byes and kind wishes at her—and, on the other side, the horses pranced and tossed their proud heads, the gates stood open, the sunshine streamed down through the brown trees, the world lay before her.

"Good-bye, everybody," she said; "and to you, for a little while, mamma." And that was the last of Nelly. There was never a Nelly yet carried off by eager horses, by an eager bridegroom, among storms of white shoes and good wishes, who was more dearly taken care of thereafter than was the Nelly who signed herself from that day in stately fashion, "Ellinor Vane."

"You are all that are left to me now, boys," said Mrs. Eastwood,

as she sat between them that evening, over the first fire of the season, which had been lighted for consolation. "Nelly will come back, but she will not be quite Nelly; one has to put up with it. "You are all that are left to me now——"

"And Innocent."

"Yes, Innocent, poor child!——"

"Look here, mother," said Jenny, somewhat hoarsely, "none of us know yet what Innocent will come to. "She's had hard work for a beginning,—none of us have had such hard work. As for Dick's and mine, though we're sorry enough for ourselves, what has it been to hers? But you'll see there's something to come of it. I suppose all that trouble is not likely to be for nothing, is it?" he said, almost indignantly, as if some one were opposing him; "if you mean what you say about Providence, do you think that can be all for nothing? I don't."

"God bless her, poor child!" said the mother, with more faith than conviction. "You always believed in her, Jenny."

"And I do now more than ever," said the boy, with a flush on his cheek, going to the window, where he stood for five minutes, gazing out into the darkness, though there was nothing to see. He was twenty by this time, and his mind was one of those which work up to conclusions long made, with an obstinacy which often brings about its own long-determined aim. "It's a fine night," he added, coming back, as if the weather had been all his thought. "What a bore that there's no river to Sterborne! I tell you what, Dick, the next best thing is to drive,—we'll get a carriage to-morrow, and drive my mother there——"

"What, drive me all the way?" cried the mother, half alarmed, yet pleased that her boy should think of her pleasure.

"We could do it in two short days—like the people in the book you are reading," said Jenny: "why not? We'll take you to the High Lodge to Innocent, instead of going by the railway—and of course you'll bring her back with you here—Dick and I will look after the carriage to-morrow morning—and we'll expect you to be ready by twelve, mamma."

"Bravo, old fellow!" said Dick, delighted; "and, Winks, my old friend," he added, as Winks dropped from his chair and came forward, stretching himself, to inquire into the proposition which had startled him out of a nap, "you shall go too——"

"But, my dear boys——" Mrs. Eastwood began in a tone of remonstrance.

"The best thing in the world for you, mamma," said Dick, "and jolly for us, once in a way, to have you all to ourselves."

What could mortal woman, being the boys' mother, say more? I am afraid she would have considered favourably the idea of going to Nova Zembla, wherever that may be, under such conditions. And Winks, though he yawned as he listened, thought well of it

too; he liked driving, on the whole, though too much of it bored him, and he had not at all approved when his mistress "put down" her carriage. They set off next morning in the brightness of noon, through the country which had not yet lost any of its beauty, though here and there the trees had yellow patches on them, and the parks were all burnt brown with the heat of summer. They were a very merry party, notwithstanding that the final examination was hanging over Dick's head, and the parting which must follow. Winks, for his part, after two or three hours of it, got bored with the levity of the conversation, and rustled about so, that he was put out of the carriage to run for the good of his health. He went along for a mile or two, pleased enough, gathering dust in clouds about him. But when he intimated a desire to be taken in, the boys, hard-hearted beings, laughed in the face of Winks.

"A run will do you good, old fellow," said Dick, with cruel satisfaction. A short time afterwards, I am sorry to say, a dreadful accident, nature unknown, happened to Winks. He uttered a heart-rending shriek, and appeared immediately after making his way towards the carriage, holding up one feathery paw in demonstrative suffering. The anxious party stopped immediately, and Winks made his way to them, laboriously limping and uttering plaintive cries. But when, all a-dust as he was, this hypocrite was lifted into the carriage, holding up the injured member—and was softly laid upon the softest cushion to have it examined, words fail me to express the sardonic grin with which he showed his milk-white teeth. There was no more the matter with the little villain's paw, my gentle reader, than with yours or mine.

Never was there a pleasanter two days' journey than this which Mrs. Eastwood made with her boys through the sunshiny autumn country, along the road, where gold-coloured leaves dropped in her lap as they drove her along, now one on the box, now another, in their turn; till the High Lodge at last appeared in sight all covered with white downy clusters of clematis done flowering, with late roses, and matted network of interlacing leaves. Innocent rushed to the door, slim and pale in her black dress, her eyes shining with sudden delight, her soft face inspired.

"You have come to take me home. I am Nelly now!" she cried, throwing her arms about the common mother. Jenny, whom she had not noticed, leant back upon the carriage, looking at her with eyes that glowed under his dark brows. He had always stood by Innocent since the day when he had read Greek to her in the Lady's Walk; he had always been sure that "something would come of her." "We don't know half what Innocent will come to!" he repeated now to himself.

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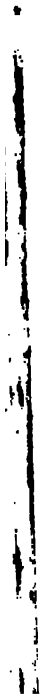
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